



Daughters *of the* Heart

CARYL
McADOO

Daughters *of the* Heart

**A Texas Romance
Book Five, 1853-1854**



Praying my story gives God glory!

**CARYL
McADOO**

Five-Star reviews

Daughters of the Heart

Oh those teenagers! Raging hormones, sibling rivalry, heads that are empty of anything except the cutest boy on the ranch, rebellion against parental control, full of themselves, conniving, conspiring to get their way . . . on and on it goes. Teenagers! To think, all of us were teenagers once upon a time back in medieval ages . . . at least that's what teens think about their parents. Everyone knows Mom and Dad are so out of touch and old fashioned!


Judging from *Daughters of the Heart*, nothing has changed today from the 1850s. Caryl Lawrence McAdoo has penned a book to tickle the funny bone and warm the heart. Her characterizations are spot on, her plot believable and her writing compels the reader to turn the page. With a villain or two who give rise to a span of time when the reader's heart leaps into their throat and three teenage daughters whose common sense has been doused by a healthy dose of hormones, not to mention, two parents who are kept on their toes from the antics of their brood, for sure, *Daughters of the Heart* will take you hostage and keep you up well past your bedtime.

This reviewer loved *Daughters of the Heart*. I do believe it is Caryl McAdoo's best book yet. Now up for pre-order, the reader would be well advised to reserve their copy. Can hardly wait to see what comes next from Mrs. McAdoo's rich imagination and gifted pen.

--Cass Wessel, multi-published author of devotionals

A fun packed Christian romance novel with plenty of action, heartbreak, tears, deception, twists, and turns. Henry's daughters, Gwendolyn and Cecelia are coming of age. His oldest daughter, Mary, had broken his heart when she eloped. Therefore they along with their younger sister, Bonnie, made a pact never to break their father's heart like their big sister had, but when suitors show up, it's hard for them to stay determined to keep their promises to each other. Will they ever know God's will for their life? Will they find true love? Will Dad accept a suitor for them and give his blessings? Their loving stepmom helps them by helping their dad to see they are growing up, and he can't hold them back. Will they realize that stepmom, May, loves them as daughters of her heart?

--Joy Gibson, a Tennessee reader and pastor's wife



This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, places, characters, and events are products of the author's imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

□ 2015 by Caryl McAdoo

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Dedication

Because of what You've done for me, I'll praise Your Holy name forever. I long to wear Your wedding ring. Oh, purify this humble bride! So that when You come, I'll be ready, pure and spotless, my lamp full of oil. At the sound of the trump, I'll meet You in the sky and join the marriage feast. One with You! Oh glory! One with You! No One else in heaven or earth's as true. What a celebration! Oh, the bliss... when You impart Your Holy kiss. (lyrics of a new song He gave me. I could never repay Him for all that He has done.)

I love You, Abba!

Then there's my Ron, my love and my life. The kindest and most

gentle man I've ever known. We've been together since sixteen years old, married at eighteen right out of high school, and enjoyed forty-seven years together—most of them.

But it's fun to live life with your best friend. We love being together, talking, laughing, and loving. As scripture says, in this world, you will have tribulation—and we certainly have had our share—but we remain full of good cheer, because God kept us and helped us through every one.

I love you, Ron—more today than yesterday, but less than tomorrow. I'll love you until forever.

And the daughters of my heart. I only birthed one baby girl, Cathryn Elizabeth McAdoo Baily Chronister who brought an unfathomable joy and sorrow to my life. Next came Carisa Marie Black McAdoo DeCormier who I embraced without condition. Then my own Snow White, whom I chose at first sight, Janis Sue Bailey McAdoo. Melissa Victoria Massey McAdoo keeps me laughing—and weeping—as I go. And God blessed me with Dana Ann Woods McKinney McAdoo who continues to swell my heart. An honorary daughter is my precious and beautiful Margarette Combs, ever faithful and true.

These women, I love. They will always live in my heart and be in my prayers, and I dedicate this story to them.

Acknowledgements

In everything I do, if there be any good, it is due to the One and Only You, Yahweh! I worship and adore You, lay my life before You, songs of praises singing! Alleluias ringing! Always and through eternity!

I acknowledge my head, Ron McAdoo, who does his best to love me as Christ loves the Church. I know for a fact—in both cases—that isn't always easy. My husband's been my man for forty-nine years (married forty-seven). I'd never achieve what I have if not for him and his wise counsel. He's quite the story teller himself and the reason I have such strong, lovable heroes!

Thank you once more, Kirk DouPonce of Dog Eared Design for creating my beautiful cover. Readers keep telling me, this is my favorite story yet, and I can say the same of your exquisite covers. What a gifted Christian graphic designer and photographer you are, so evidently led of the Lord.

There's a group I call the Christian eVALUaters. Members are the

first readers (usually) after all the edits are made (five or six editors), and sometimes still find one or two more to help make it the best it can be. They support me on social media with every cover reveal, book launch, and promotion, and they review all my books! Authors need a few special volunteers, and every one of these ladies—and the few gentlemen, too—deserve and have my deep gratitude.

God-sent Lenda Selph who continues to bless my soul proofreading, my personal comma-kaziqueen!☐ And Louise Koiner and Cass Wessel are such wonderful catchers, too! Thank you, ladies!

And I must acknowledge all my readers! Thank you for reading my stories, for leaving reviews, for clicking ‘Share’ and ‘Like’ on Facebook, tweeting, and recommending my stories to your friends. I need y’all and thank y’all and pray for God to bless you all for blessing me! My cup overflows!




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Chapter One



A sob preceded the slammed door. Cecelia's heartbeat quickened, and she pushed herself up from her water closet's floor. She covered her mouth for her sister's sake then returned the glass to its hiding place behind the washcloths.

"Poor Gwendolyn. Daddy's such a..."

Actually, no. He wasn't.

She straightened her dress and strolled into her room. Footfalls echoed up the stairs.

Was that another sob?

Her sister's bedroom door banged against the jam. Hopefully, she didn't break it, 'cause if she did, he'd for sure have her doing the fixin', and poor ladyfingers Gwen could never be called handy—unless one needed sewing done.

Though everything in her wanted to race over, she counted to ten, then hurried across the hall, tiptoeing wide steps. Swinging the door back and forth once on its hinges, satisfied her. Nothing broke, all in order, good.

She eased in. Her older sister sprawled across her bed with her faced buried in a pile of pillows. No one slept on as many pillows as that girl.

"Sister, what's wrong? What'd he say?"

Gwen shook her head, but didn't look at her. "He's so pigheaded."

A warm breeze fluttered the curtain, carrying the scent of fresh-cut hay. Cecelia sat on the bed and patted her sister's back. "I'm so sorry."

She rolled over. "I hate him."

"No, you do not. We all love him, and you know it."

Gwen shook her head. "I hate her, too."

"Oh, don't say that. What did Mama do anyway? She hardly ever gets involved."

"Well, that's just it. She sat there the whole time and never said a word on my behalf. Didn't even try to talk one bit of sense into him! She's a female... you'd think —"

The door opened.

"Hey, you two. What happened? I saw Clay leaving." She stepped inside. "Why'd he go?"

Waving off her baby sister, Cecelia gave a relieved sigh it wasn't Daddy. "Go away, Bonnie Claire. You wouldn't understand."

Gwen sniffed then sat up. "No, it's alright. Let her come on in." She patted the bed inviting the baby on. "Come up here by me. Close the door though."

The twelve-year-old climbed up next to her oldest sister—well, at home anyway...or if she didn't count Rebecca or Mary Rachael—and snuggled in next to her. She put her hand on Gwen's cheek. "Are you crying?"

"Not anymore. I'll be fine."

"What happened? Did you and Clay have a fight?"

Cecelia looked to her big sister who shrugged then faced the baby. "No, Daddy just said he couldn't come courtin' anymore."

"Oh, no! Why would he?"

"Because, supposedly, we're not a good match. At least, that's what he claims. And worse, May just sat there and let him talk."

"Don't call her that. Really, she hasn't done anything, Gwen, and that's so rude."

"You weren't in there, CeCe! She just sat there staring at the floor."

"Oh no." Bonnie's eyes grew wide. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. What can I?"

"I don't know, but you love him, right? There must be something...."

"I thought I did."

"So? If you love him –"

"No! We cannot go against Daddy. No matter what or how pigheaded he gets."

Her heart broke over Gwen's terrible situation. "But Mary Rachel –"

"Exactly!" She rolled off the bed and walked to the window. "You were there, CeCe...when he got her telegram. It was almost like a part of him died. She broke his heart, then Caleb broke hers. Daddy was right all along."

"What about Jethro Risen, though? If she hadn't of run off, then she never would have met him, and I like him a lot. Don't you?"

"But you cannot think like that, Bonnie! You and CeCe and me, we are true daughters. He loves us more than anything in the world."

"Even Mama?"

"Yes, sweetie, he loves us even more than May. He's known us longer."

"That's right. We've got his blood. He loves us most." Cecelia turned toward the window and her older sister. "So what are you saying? You're just going to quit seeing him because Daddy said? Clay

isn't like Caleb, and you know it."

"But I have to. If Daddy says no, then that's that. It only means there's someone else out there for me."

"It's just not right."

"It is, CeCe. And I want you to promise right now."

"Me? Promise what?"

"And you, too, Bonnie Claire."

"I will. I promise."

"Promise what, Gwen?"

She walked over to the bed and took both her sisters' hands, making a circle.

"I want you both to promise with me that you will never break Daddy's heart. You have to agree, too, or you won't be a true sister. He doesn't deserve it. We can never break his heart like Mary Rachel did."

The baby dropped her hand and Cecelia's then folded her arms across her chest. "I liked Clay."

"Bonnie, promise."

She wrinkled her nose. "But if Clay Briggs isn't good enough, he's never going to let any of us get married."



Clarksville, seat of Red River County, Texas. Finally, the Belle skidded to a stop. Elijah shook his head. Jethro had not lied, couldn't be a more bustling, quaint place tucked into the woods in all of the state.

He kept to his bench until the other two passengers disembarked, a drummer never at a lack for words and a man about his age who appeared military by his bearing, but refused the salesman's attempt at conversation.

Good thing. If he'd been as big a talker as the drummer, Elijah would have had to ride with the driver.

Once the stage's dust settled, he climbed down, retrieved his carpetbag, glanced around the busy square, then strolled into the hotel. What was a Donoho? Had to be someone's surname.

Again, he hung back until the other two men booked rooms then bellied up to the front desk. "Henry Buckmeyer. Could you tell me how I get to his place? Do you know?"

"Yeah, sure I know. You need a room?"

"Not unless Mister Buckmeyer's home is too far to get to by dark. It's my understanding his ranch is near town."

"That's right, only about five miles south as the crow flies." The

clerk nodded to his right. "Two blocks down is a livery. You can hire a buggy there and just tell your driver. Everyone knows the Buckmeyer place."

Half an hour later, with a map drawn with coal on a burlap seed sack and his new rig—a well-built surrey and a nice little mare—Elijah headed south out of town. The whole trip from California, he hadn't let himself think about Mary's sisters.

But now, almost there, his heartbeat quickened, and he could hardly get enough breath for the anticipation.

Jethro hadn't stretched the truth about Clarksville. No reason to think he would varnish the reality of the abundance of Buckmeyer beauty. He could hardly wait to lay eyes on Gwendolyn or Cecelia.

The baby girl, too, except she'd not be old enough to wed for a few more years.

Each so beautiful, the sunsets were jealous. That's what his partner had said.

He'd take himself one for wife if they were half as pretty as their sister. And if cut from the same cloth as Mary Rachel. The only thing that surpassed her beauty was the size and sincerity of her sweet heart.



Cecelia handed her stepmother another split peg then chuckled. "A man may work from sun to sun —"

"But a woman's work is never done." May smiled then leaned in close. "How is our Gwendolyn doing?"

Cecelia did a slow three-sixty then shrugged. "She thought she loved Clay, but she won't go against Daddy's wishes. I don't think she ever will."

"Good." May held out her hand.

Cecelia handed over another peg. "Have you asked him?"

"No, I wanted to wait until after —"

"Mother. Three-quarters of the girls my age in the county are already married. The rest are so...so...undesirable, no one wants them. I'm almost seventeen. What if all the good ones get taken in the next year?"

"CeCe, I said I would talk to him. But you know how your father is." She grinned. "If I can make it seem to be his idea, then your chances go up considerably."

Though she had to agree, she still hated that Mary Rachel had ruined it for her. Just because she ran off and married the wrong man, didn't mean Cecelia would.

Mercy—as the great Henry Buckmeyer would say—if he had his way, she might never marry and she and her sisters would grow up to be old maids. The thought broke her heart.

Her bratty brother busted through the back door. “Rider coming! Pro’lly another suitor for Gwen.” Houston put his finger in his mouth and faked a gag. “Pro’lly another gold digger like all the rest. Why else would someone want her?”

“Samuel Houston Buckmeyer! Watch your mouth, or I’ll hold you down and get Bonnie to give you what for.”

May leaned in close. “Leave him be. He’s just trying to get your goat.”

Well, the spoiled little terror already had, but ignoring him did make sense. He only craved attention. When he wasn’t the center of everyone’s, he acted up something awful. She helped finish pinning the wash, then decided she’d go see the new suitor.

Wow, word surely spread like a late summer grassfire in Red River County.

Clay hadn’t been gone but a few hours.

“Where’s Crockett?” She handed the bag of clothespins to May. If that baby needed tending, she’d see to him. Couldn’t get enough of that little booger. “Need any help with him?”

“No, Lacey Rose and Bart are playing blocks with him in the wash house.”

“Guess I’ll go see this beau, then, before Daddy runs him off.”

“Certainly, you go on. I’ve only got one more load boiling.”

Cecelia winked. “You do know we have folks who will do the laundry.”

“Of course silly, but I like doing your father’s and Crockett’s. And well, to tell the truth, I’m having a bit of trouble with my latest story. I should never have told Houston and Bonnie I’d pen them a children’s book.”

Strolling through the kitchen, Cecelia snagged a gingersnap right under Mammy’s nose then eased on out into the hall. Hmmm. Empty and quiet. Plenty unusual. Her father’s office door closed in the middle of the afternoon? What was that about? She hurried upstairs and tapped on her sister’s door.

“Come in.”

She stuck her head through a narrow opening. “Who’s here?”

“I don’t know. Someone to see Daddy, I guess.”

“Houston said the guy came calling on you.”

“That boy. Daddy needs to tan his hide. He’s all time spreading rumors. Maybe we ought to take things into our own hands and wash his mouth out with lye soap until he stops.”

“Now there’s an idea.” She stepped in and waved the door toward

shut but never let go of it. "Come on. Let's go see who it is."

"No, I don't much cotton to that idea. Not up to meeting someone new."

"Fine, but don't be asking me any questions."

Gwen shook her head then waved her off. Cecelia had to smile. She couldn't help it if she hated keeping news to herself. Mercy, holding stuff in would hurt a body. Everyone knew that.

She eased on downstairs, loafed around the kitchen, keeping out of Mammy's way and only slipping one more snap until her father's library door swung open. She took two steps then froze.

Lord above have mercy on her soul! The man's sky blue eyes met hers. For a heartbeat, she stared into the windows of his soul.

Such an awesome sight! The urge to dive in almost overwhelmed her, but what a good thing she didn't. If she ever gave in, she may never come out again.

Her father stepped toward her. "Cecelia! Come here, sweetness, this is Elijah Eversole, Jethro and Mary's partner. He's going to build me a steam engine for the mill."

She blinked, and the man looked away. "Good to meet you, sir." She smiled, but not too big. Hopefully, her father had not seen her make a fool of herself. Him and his stupid no-courting-until-you-were-eighteen rule.

And just that day, she'd promised to abide by it.

Chapter Two



The meal's aromas teased Elijah's saliva glands almost as much as the Buckmeyer girls' beauty tempted his eyes. He constantly had to make himself not stare across the table now that they had taken their seats.

The light-skinned Negro man sitting next to him extended his hand. Elijah realized everyone at the table did the same to the persons beside them.

Henry nodded to Elijah's right. "Bart, I believe it's your turn to pray."

"Yes, sir." The boy stood. "Lord! Dank You for runnin' off dat dold digger Tlay! And...uh...well, da grub smells great so bless Mamm—I mean Miss Jewel for tookin' it! And...uh...danks for...uh all of it. Amen."

The young woman on the other side of his neighbor spoke up. "Bartholomew Baylor, you've been doing so well with your hard C sounds. Remember? Kkk. Kkk. Kkk. Then you go and forget it when you're talking to God."

"Tan I have dose taters?"

The youngest beauty shook her head and rolled her eyes. "He's hopeless, Miss Laura."

Elijah couldn't keep from smiling. The oldest young lady, if he had it right, Gwendolyn—what a beautiful name—shot the boy daggers, but Cecelia appeared to be having trouble not laughing at young Bart."

The dishes started flying around the table, and he concentrated on filling his plate to sate all that slobbering. He still stole glances at the sisters every chance though. They had beautiful smiles.

What gorgeous creatures, the Buckmeyer girls. Even the youngest was obviously blooming into quite the beauty herself.

But then according to Mary their mother was even prettier.

"Bart?"

"Yes, Untle."

"Who gave you the idea that Mister Clay had ulterior motives?"

"What?"

The young girl sitting next to him slung an elbow. "Uncle Henry's asking why you called Mister Clay a gold digger."

“Well, aint he?”

“No, his family is plenty comfortable. Now who gave you the idea he was after Gwen’s money and not her heart?”

The boy shrugged and put his chin on his chest.

The young man who sat on the other side of Bart jumped to his feet. “It were me, Pa. I spotted it first off that he were only after our money! Why else would he want Gwendolyn?”

“Houston! Daddy!” Gwen pointed her fork at the malefactor. “You need to whip that boy! He’s such a brat.”

“Now, Gwendolyn. Let’s not be rash.” The man turned back to his son. “So, Houston, is it your contention then that your mother was an ugly lady?”

“Oh, Heavens no, Pa. I’ve seen her pictures, and she was very beautiful. Only lady I’ve ever seen more handsome than Mother Sue is Mama May.” He smiled like he’d found the correct answer that would keep corporal punishment at bay.

Elijah looked to the boy’s father who nodded.

“My library after supper, young man. I admire you for speaking up for Bart, but we guard the truth in this house.”

“What? Pa, why? I didn’t tell no lie.”

“Eat, Son, we’ll talk about it then.”

The boy slumped back in his chair then threw his sister an I’ll-get-you look.

The clan’s patriarch squared off toward Elijah. “Did you get settled in? Anything you need?”

“Yes, sir, and no, don’t need a thing. The room is real nice.”

Gwen, who sat next to her father, spoke up before the man could say more. “It belonged to Levi and Rose before they built their own house.”

“That’s the Texas Ranger, right?”

“Yes, but he hardly ever goes off anymore.” Cecelia beat her sister with an answer, then stared at him a bit. Though desperately wanting to match her gaze, he made himself take a bite of the best roast beef he’d eaten in...maybe ever.

Besides, he’d never purposely disrespect the man or his daughters.

But when he looked up, she studied her own plate, wearing a rather bemused expression.

Oh, Lord, could You have made her lips more kissable?

She met his eyes. “He and Wallace traded the Comanche for Rose, then she and Levi fell in love.”

The youngest pretty spoke up. “Mama wrote a book about it, their romance. It’s called *The Ranger* if you want to read it.”

“Yes, I already have. I’m looking forward to meeting him and Wallace.” Elijah leaned out in the direction of the girl’s stepmother.

"Mary loaned me *The Granger* as well. I sure enjoyed reading both. You're quite the novelist, Mis'ess Buckmeyer."

"Thank you, Elijah. And you're welcomed to call me May."

"Oh no, wouldn't dream of it, ma'am."

The conversation increased as the scrumptious meal decreased. Elijah enjoyed the interaction between the sisters and their baby brother once he finished eating.

His mother handed him over to Gwendolyn then on down the line of beauties. The youngest Buckmeyer seemed to love his sisters and had a great time getting passed from one to the other.

Gave Elijah a great opportunity to feast his eyes on the young ladies, and he enjoyed that even more than the food. How was he ever going to choose between the two older sisters, or should he focus on Gwendolyn? Cecelia certainly exhibited many fine qualities. But then could he get either to agree to wed?

And what about their father?

Would he give either's hand?



Cecelia nuzzled Crockett's neck, then turned him a bit and glanced up. Elijah stared at Gwen. She buried her face in her baby brother's neck. Good gracious, stop it. She loved her sister, and definitely would not allow any fool man to come between them.

Mercy, he wasn't even a suitor. He'd come to build a steam engine.

Who wanted a Californian anyway? No one in Texas. She was Texas born and bred and loved it! Long live the Lone Star State! She kissed the baby's cheek. How could he be so soft and sweet? She just wanted to love him all up.

His dark hair with those blue eyes surely made him the most handsome baby boy west of the Mississippi.

He stretched out his hand and leaned toward Bonnie. "Her." He grinned back at Cecelia, teasing her. "Me want me BonNEE!"

She twisted him away from the twelve-year-old's reach. Crockett squealed, then giggled when she blew her lips against his neck then handed him off. Not even two, and he already played them all like a virtuoso.

Bound to be a heartbreaker, the little booger couldn't be loved more, leastwise not by her.

She glanced at Elijah. Speaking of breaking hearts, how no young woman had snapped him up, she'd never know. He probably left a string of them back in the Gold Rush state.

He met her gaze. Her heart flipped then thundered. Why was he looking at her? She wasn't even old enough to be courted. Didn't he know that? Or maybe he fit the bill as the type of man her daddy warned her and her sisters about?

Still, she couldn't stop from smiling. He glanced to her daddy, and she followed his lead, willing him to quiz Mister Eversole.

Or had he already?

"Elijah."

"Yes, sir?"

"You up to getting started in the morning?"

"Yes, sir. The boiler should be here in a day or two, and I'd like to work out where you're wanting to put it. Needs to be just right. Two ton of iron isn't that easy to toss around."

"True."

For the next bit, the two of them discussed the saw mill. Not one time did her father even start to ask any of the questions Cecelia wanted him to. Boiler this, and iron that. Yes, he could cast any part he wanted.

Made her want to scream, ask him, Daddy! Has he got someone back home? Is he a Christian man? Come on, get to the good stuff.

Then her father stood. "Elijah, normally as a guest, I'd give you a pass, but since you're going to be here for a while, the ladies cook, and we clean up."

The man jumped to his feet. "Small price to pay for such a fantastic meal. I'm happy to help, sir."

Cecelia started to offer to take his place, but then that would leave him in there alone with her sister. And that just would not do. Gwen never volunteered for anything that even came close to resembling work.

No, she'd let the handsome Elijah Eversole go on off to his kitchen duties with the menfolk. She needed a word with her sister.

She lingered at the table, waiting to get Gwen alone, but then she left with Mother to look at something she wanted her to embroider for Crockett. One thing her sister could do and loved doing was needle work. Laura had taught her, and she truly excelled.

So, Cecelia hung around a little more hoping for bit of time with Mister Eversole.

Her father dashed those plans, taking her subject straight from the kitchen to his office then monopolized him until staying at the table all alone seemed ridiculous, even to her. She meandered up to her room.

How to broach the topic of the debonair houseguest with her sister consumed her thoughts. Though she kept starting over, no good intro came.

Maybe she'd write Mary Rachel a letter. Taking her stationery Mother had insisted she have monogrammed in New York from the desk drawer, she sat and opened the inkwell. She dipped her pen and put it to paper.

Dear Mary... her oldest sister knew Elijah well, should she ask her about him? *Elijah has arrived. He's down with Daddy now.* She sat back in her chair.

After a few hoots of the old owl out in the tree by her window, she leaned forward again and dipped the tip of her new pen. *Cecelia Belle Eversole. CeCe Eversole. Mis'ess Elijah Eversole.*

The double E looked beautiful. She loved the flourishes they allowed. *Mis'ess Cecelia Eversole.* She liked the S'es alliteration, too. Her first name proved a fit—Gwendolyn Eversole—oh, yes, much better than her sister's.

Again and again, she wrote it. Hers flowed right into his and looked so pretty. She'd need a plan if she were to have him. And one flitted into her conscious, a good one.

But then a fly flew right into the ointment of her daydream and flapped its tiny wings to beat the band. Wait. She could enlist help.

Upon reflection, getting Bonnie—or Heaven forbid, Houston—to comply wouldn't be that hard. Would it? Shouldn't be. So, she tried her new signature again and again, filling the page with and without her middle name.

The Carol didn't really sound appropriate, but it did still look nice. Tomorrow! What a great day it promised to be.



Henry leaned over the crib, gently lifted his hand from its last pat, then straightened and waited to see if Crockett would stay asleep. The littlest Buckmeyer exhaled then took to sleep suckling.

Once he tucked the man-plant in, he slipped into bed and May's waiting arms.

He kissed her cheek. "He's almost two. Isn't he getting a bit long of tooth to still be nursing?"

She kissed him back. "Oh, darling, he's still a baby."

He laughed. "If he gets to where he can unbutton your blouse by himself, then he gets weaned."

"We'll see. Now if..." She let her voice trail off. Even in the pale moonlight, he could see the wheels turning. Him and his big mouth.

"We already agreed. One's enough."

"Didn't you tell me that Sue nursed all her babies until the next one came along?"

“All but Houston.” He let the declaration hang between them, wafting on the crickets’ song more than a few heartbeats. “We were young and stupid.”

“Not so. You, my love, were never stupid. Young? I’ll give you, but short of brains? No, sir.”

“Perhaps. Speaking of smart young men, what did you think of Elijah?”

“Oh, he seems very capable, entertaining, and kind, but I’m telling you, he’s brought trouble. I’m afraid we’ve got a problem.”

“How so?”

“Didn’t you see him staring at the girls?”

“I noticed him watching them play with Crockett, but I wouldn’t call it staring.”

She laughed. “And I don’t suppose you’d say our daughters were staring back even harder either.”

“Gwen and CeCe?”

“Don’t forget Bonnie. She eagle-eyed Mister Eversole, too.”

“Not my baby girl.”

“Yes, indeed. She’s coming thirteen, Henry. Soon enough, she’ll not be thinking about much else.”

Would he ever understand? “But I thought Gwendolyn loved Clay. Are you saying she’s past him already?”

“Oh, dear, she’s way over him. Don’t you know? The very best thing to get your mind off a love lost is to find a new one.”

“But he’s a man.”

“Yes.” She stretched out the three letter affirmation. “A handsome, single man, sugar.”

Now this was not good. And he hadn’t even thought to quiz Elijah about his intentions. Could it be? Was he even interested? Or had May read something that wasn’t there?

“I’ll talk with him tomorrow. He probably has someone in California waiting on him.”

“Well, take your care, and don’t run him off. Mary Rachel and Jethro both spoke highly of him.”

He bumped her shoulder. “I wouldn’t dream of it, least not until he builds us that steam engine.”

Chapter Three



The Black's neck bowed. He snorted and pawed the ground.

"Easy, boy." Henry patted the stallion, dismounted, then led him into the barn. Right there in the first stall, a strange gray snorted his own challenge, letting out an ear-splitting whinny.

Allowing the two to blow noses a bit, he unsaddled and brushed out his mount before putting The Black into his own space. Soon, the stallion's attention focused solely on the grain in his trough and rack full of hay, ignoring the interloper.

Good thing none of the mares in the back lot were open.

That reminded him. Best check on the chestnut. She'd bagged up and should be ready to foal any day now. He'd get Charley to, put him on the watch.

Maybe ask Houston, also,; the boy could practice a little more responsibility. Henry enjoyed the interaction of all the boys and how great the thirteen-year-old handled all the younger ones.

Putting the boys and equines out of his thoughts, he hurried inside to see who'd come calling.

Gwendolyn met him in the kitchen. The girl must have been waiting for him. "Hey, Daddy." She kissed his cheek. "There's a Mister Braxton Hightower come to see you."

"That his gray in the barn?"

"Yes, sir. CeCe put him there."

He grabbed one of Jewel's sugar cookies, took a little nip, and smiled. "He say what he wanted?"

"No, sir. Just that he needed to talk with you. Mama May and Houston are keeping him company out on the porch."

"Thank you, my love. Where'd CeCe go?"

Gwen raised her off shoulder a smidgen, like that was all the effort her sister was worth. "She and Bonnie went somewhere."

Jewel swept into the kitchen, her full skirt dusting the floorboards. "She and baby girl took a dinner basket to you and that new fella, but nows you be back, want me to send someone for them?"

"CeCe and Bonnie went?"

"Yes, sir."

"They walking?"

“No, sir. My Chester helped them rig the surrey. Houston loaned them gals his gelding.”

Wonder he didn't see them coming back from the sawmill, but then.... Well, perhaps his wife was right, and no one could accuse Cecelia of being stupid. “No, leave them be. Elijah needs to eat.”

A hand touched his forearm. He faced Gwen.

“Don't forget Mister Hightower.”

He tossed the rest of the cookie in his mouth, winked at his cook, then strolled to the porch. Once he cleared the front door, the visitor jumped to his feet and extended his hand. “Mister Buckmeyer, I'm Braxton Hightower. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

The fellow looked him square in the eye. Henry took his hand. Good firm grip, but not one of those idiots who tried to show off by crushing your fingers.

Didn't seem like he had anything to hide or sell, and Henry liked that. “Pleasure's mine. I take it you've met my wife and son?”

“Yes, sir. My mama would dance a jig if she knew I had the good fortune of visiting with the famed novelist. I'm certain she's read every book.” He smiled at May. “I was just telling your wife that she's got a loyal fan, to be sure.”

Polite, another plus. Stood at ease, but still kept his back straight and chin up. “You an army man, Braxton?”

“Navy.”

Houston tugged on his sleeve. “Can I go play now?”

He eyed his son, who looked from him to May then back, like she had been the one to insist he chaperone her and young Mister Hightower. “Sure, but don't go far. I need to have a word with you.”

His shoulders slumped. “Pa, what'd I do now?”

“I just want to talk. Now go on, but stay within whistling range.”

“Yes, sir.”

The eight-year-old jumped off the porch and disappeared around the house in two shakes.

He faced Hightower. “So what brings you to my neck of God's Country?”

“Sir, would there be a more private place we can talk?”

Henry gestured toward the extra rocker then sat next to May. “No one will bother us here, and I keep no secrets from my wife.”

The man turned the chair sideways then eased down. “When the cabal my father is aligned with discovered I was coming to Texas to buy timberland, they asked me to look you up, sir.”

“Who are these gents? Anyone I know?”

“At this time, I'm not at that liberty, but if you are interested in standing for office....”

Oh, so that was it. Henry glanced at May, she smiled.

“We would love for you to come to Washington, meet with this group of potential supporters. See for yourself how many you know.”

“I’ve toyed with the idea of throwing my hat at the governor’s office, but the running seems way more distasteful than whatever pleasure winning might bring.”

“Understandable on the state level, but the good you could do as president of these United States, sir, would far outweigh the hardship of campaigning.”

Not much had ever taken Henry aback, but the young man’s declaration certainly had. His heartbeat quickened. He arched his brows and gave a little nod. He’d let himself dream of following in Jackson’s footsteps.

Still, having one’s life cussed and discussed by every two-bit rag across the country always splashed cold water on that fantasy.

“Has Hades frozen over, and no one bothered to tell me?”

Braxton laughed. “No, sir, but it would not take the nether world freezing to get you elected in ’60.” The young man turned serious.

“With emancipation the prize, is any price too high?”

“Noble cause, but the slavery issue...I fear it will rip this country apart.”

“Perhaps. But if it does, then who better than the hero of San Jacinto to lead us through it?”

Henry rocked forward, studied the man’s shoes a moment. He scratched his ever present New Blue’s ear then leaned back. “You have me confused with my dog’s sire, Blue Dog. He was the real hero of that battle.”

A chuckle eased the tension in the air. “I’ve heard that story. Well, actually read about it.” He grinned at May. “Your wife’s fame would be no detriment, sir, but she’s made you quite renowned in your own right.”

“I knew marrying her was the right thing to do.” He chuckled.

“With that and San Jacinto, you could ride it all the way to the White House.”

“Really? My books have made Henry famous?”

“Oh, yes ma’am. When my baby sister found out I intended to stop by the Buckmeyer’s, she about had a conniption fit wanting to come meet you and the whole Buckmeyer clan.”

“How flattering.”

“If Levi Baylor were to stand for vice president with your husband...” Braxton grinned. “We’d win by a landslide.” He faced Henry again. “She’d certainly make a beautiful First Lady.”

“That’s an understatement.” Henry loved on her with his eyes. He flattered her every day like that. “Politics aside, how much timberland are you looking to buy?”

“At least ten thousand acres. Why, you selling?”

“No, I like what we’ve got, but I do know them that are. Usually, I wait until someone brings me a deal to increase my holdings.”

May chuckled but held her tongue. He loved that about her. Hightower wouldn’t have a clue to the reason for her mirth, but he knew all too well. Full price plus, Lizbeth’s parcel had cost him. Praise God.

Other than the one time Miss Akins kissed him, he’d never laid a hand on the girl. And now she was out of his life for good.

He patted May’s knee then resumed. “But word is, there’s a nice block—around half that—a ways east of here up along the river. Plus several more I know of might make the difference if they don’t have to be connected.”

“No, they don’t. The big section would be a great place to start. Perhaps you could point it out on a map?”

“Better, I’ll take you come morning. Hate it if you got lost and the hogs or worse met your demise.”

Hightower stood. “Well, thank you, sir. That’s mighty kind of you. Where shall we meet? I’ve got a room at the Donoho.”

“How about my dining room? Jewel is a way better cook than any of those hash slingers in town.”

“I can do that, be pleased to. What time?”

Henry laughed. “Sit down. I’m offering you a room here to home base from. We’ll send for your things. In the meantime, perhaps you can twist my arm about that trip to DC.” He chuckled, smiled at May, then looked back. “If I was to dismiss you offhand, in time, I might regret it.”

“Thank you again, sir. Most generous. Perhaps I can repay the kindness somehow.”

“Who knows? Maybe down the road, you could sell me some of your logs. As we speak, our saw mill is being fitted with a new steam engine.”



“Pa is going to be mad.”

Cecelia shot her little sister the look. The one that seemed to work less and less of late. “No, he is not.”

Bonnie leaned back on the surrey’s seat and crossed her arms over her budding chest. “Well, ten cents isn’t enough.”

“Bonnie Claire Buckmeyer! We made a deal. You know how Daddy feels about welching. You gave your word.”

“But I’m not talking about today. If you ever want me to

chaperone you again, I want a quarter.”

“Mercy, girl! A dime is too much. Two bits is highway robbery.”

“Don’t care. I didn’t know we were going to just sit here and watch them work. It’s so boring. Why do you want to? Let’s just leave it.”

“They’ll break for dinner soon enough. I did not come all this way to just drop off the basket and hightail it back home.”

“Fine. Fifteen cents, and that’s my best offer.”

Cecelia mentally counted the coins in the bottom of her jewelry box, at fifteen a pop, wouldn’t be enough to make it to the end of the cotton planting when Miss Laura would start school back.

And she definitely did not want to ask Gwen. Elijah stood and arched his back, obviously saw her for the first time and grinned.

Sure didn’t know what her little sister was griping about. Cecelia could sit there all day long and watch Mister Eversole work. From morning ’til night if she could, just to see him smile. Her heartbeat picked up.

Maybe he’d call it quits for lunch and come on over. Oh...oh...sour grapes! What was it she’d planned to say?

He bent back over the hunk of metal. Must have something needing to get finished. She sighed and glanced at the twelve-year-old.

“I’ve got a greenback and twelve cents. That’s all I’ve got, Bonnie. If you’ll promise to come with me every day until lessons start up again, I’ll give you that and....” Movement stopped her.

All the men suddenly milled around.

“Look! I think they’re stopping to eat.”

“Wait. What else do I get?”

She grabbed the basket, stood, then smiled at Bonnie. “Come on, Sis. We’ll talk about it on the way home. Today’s already settled.”



Without even acting like he noticed the two youngest Buckmeyer sisters, Elijah took a seat out of earshot of the gang of men Henry had put in his charge. According to Jethro Risen, bosses didn’t fraternize with the hired help.

And if the workers’ conversation continued along the same lines, he wasn’t much interested in socializing with them anyway.

His true interest hurried toward him carrying a basket he hoped she’d filled with some more of Miss Jewel’s cooking. Breakfast wore off hours ago.

Still, if she only brought butter sandwiches, that’d be fine by him. He’d skip the meal all together to have the pleasure of her company.

He took a breath and held it.

The girl smiled bigger the closer she got. He tried not to stare, glanced at the little sister, but his eyes hurried back to the beauty, couldn't get enough of that smile.

Though he wouldn't have believed it possible, the young lady was even more beautiful than Mary. He was sure of it. And she obviously had a hankering for his company, too.

"Hey, Elijah, where's Daddy? I brought you and him some dinner."

"That was sweet of you, CeCe." He nodded toward the younger girl. "Hi, Bonnie Belle. Thank you, too."

"My name is not Belle. My name is Bonnie Claire. My sister's name is Belle, Gwendolyn Belle."

He stared at the beauty, couldn't help it.

"And her middle name's –"

"Bonnie Claire, hush up. Mister Eversole doesn't care about our middle names." She softened her furrowed eyebrows before facing him again. "So where's Daddy?"

"He went home mid-morning. You didn't pass him on the way?"

"I didn't see him. Was he riding that black stallion of his?"

"Yes, I brought the wagon. He rode."

"That explains it. We came the long way around, over the bridge."

"Since you brought extra, why don't you two join me? I'd be pleased for the company. There'd surely be enough. Put together, you young ladies can't eat as much as your father."

"Oh, CeCe, c –"

"Bonnie."

The little girl huffed and glared at her big sister. "Well, we've really got to get. I's planning on –"

"Don't be rude, Bonnie. Mind your manners. We can certainly keep Mister Eversole company if it pleases him."

"But –"

CeCe cut off her sister with a rather loud, "We'd love to. Wouldn't we, Bonnie?"

The little one wrinkled her nose and puckered her lips. "Well, sure. Why not? We're in trouble already anyway." She straightened her face back to normal and turned toward him. "Hey, Elijah, you married?"

"Bonnie Claire!"

Her face wrinkled again, every part of it. "Don't be using both my names! You're not Rebecca or my mother!" She turned and stomped off in a huff but kept on talking. "Been in a tither all morning wanting to know if he was or if he wasn't! I was only trying to earn my money."

Elijah laughed, played as though he hadn't heard. If things didn't work out with either of the older Buckmeyer girls. He'd have to wait on that one.

"No, I'm not married. Never have been." She kept walking back toward the surrey. "Don't even have a female friend waiting for me in California."

The offended young lady never even looked back.

"I...I'm sorry. You'll have to forgive my sister. She's such a brat sometimes."

With the little one safely out of earshot, he turned to CeCe. "No offense taken. I understand the asking." The beauty's face reminded him of when Moses worked on the roof of the orphanage all day and burnt red as a lobster.

Poor girl. He softened his voice. "And yes, I'm a believer in Jesus Christ and have followed him in baptism."

Though Bonnie looked away, he could still see her pouting lips and turned back. His smile almost hurt his face. Gracious, he needed to get a grip. She'd think him a raving idiot.

"Good to know you're a believer." Cecelia grinned. "What brought that on?"

"Just trying to save your father some time. He quizzed me real hard, also told me you were too young to be courted."

"He didn't!" Her mirth disappeared. "He did?"

Elijah nodded. "Afraid so."

Chapter Four



Cecelia glanced at Bonnie then back to Mister Eversole.

“Daddy blamed himself for Mary Rachel running off. So he came up with his stupid rule about being eighteen.” She spread her lips into the smile she’d been practicing, the one that hopefully said, ‘I’m worth the waiting if you only will.’

Elijah nodded, but didn’t return the smile. Instead, he looked past her to little Miss Pouty Face. “Excuse me a moment, CeCe.” He hurried past her, stood next to Bonnie, and said something Cecelia couldn’t hear.

Returning with his arm around her little sister’s shoulder, Bonnie Claire beamed as though he’d just promised his eternal love.

Oh Lord, what was the matter with the man?

“Let’s eat. The boys said they only take half an hour for dinner.”

The man inhaled two cold biscuits, more than half of the even colder roast beef slab, six tomatoes slices, and a big piece of cold pie. All washed down with half the jar of mustang grape juice, but none of it as chilly as Cecelia’s heart.

Why had he looked at her the way he did yesterday then act like making Bonnie happy was the most important thing?

Didn’t he realize she’d paid her little sister to chaperone? Men! Would she ever understand them?

He extended the juice jar, and she took it. Her fingers brushed his and a warmth spread from his touch to her heart. He grinned. “I sure appreciate you coming, CeCe.”

“You’re welcome, my pleasure.” Had she remembered to smile? What should she say? Most of all she wanted to ask him what he’d told Bonnie, but that wouldn’t do. “I really prefer Cecelia. I love the way the L I A rolls off a person’s tongue.” Had she said that aloud? Oh, no.

Have mercy, Lord. How stupid.

Movement pulled her eyes away from him to the sawmill shed. One of the cousins put a match to his pipe and stared in her direction. Probably one of Daddy’s spies. “So. How’s it coming with your steam engine?”

That was good. Get him to talking. Besides, the sound of his voice caressed her ears. She could listen to him all day.

“Better than expected. The boiler I bought in New Orleans should be here in a day or two. We’re getting everything ready for it.” He stood. “Care to inspect our progress?”

She jumped to her feet, as did her baby sister. Why couldn’t she go pout in the buggy again? “I’d love to.” She hoped he would take her hand and stroll around and explain how it all worked, but no.

Instead, he stuck his paws in his trousers’ pockets. Though the machine talk bored her to tears, she did her best to smile, nod, and exclaim intermittently.

Too soon, time came for her to go back home, the last thing she wanted to do, but he said he needed to get to work, and she couldn’t come up with any plausible excuses to stay any longer.

Nothing to do but leave.

Hopefully, Bonnie had pegged Daddy wrong, and he wouldn’t be upset about her bringing Elijah dinner. Of course, she’d brought enough for him, too. So what could he really say, after all? Surely he’d appreciate that. He’d never guess....

“I don’t appreciate you asking Elijah right out if he was married. That was nothing but rude, and you know it.”

“Well, I don’t get why in the whole world you would be. You wanted to know, didn’t you? And asking is the best way to find out, isn’t it? The onliest way as I see it since if he was, his wife would be all the way back in California.”

“Don’t get sassy with me, little girl. And onliest is not a word, either.”

Her sister crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, how you going to find a thing out if you don’t ask a question?”

“You can be coy, come in the back door. Maybe say something like, I imagine your wife is missing you. Or, I love that shirt, did your wife make it?”

The younger burst out laughing. “You kidding me? Ought to be glad I asked him right out so you didn’t have to look like a lunatic.” She turned in the seat. “Now let’s talk about your money and what I have to do to get it.”

Once she got the horse headed home and threw one last goodbye wave, she glanced over at her sister. “First, I want to know what Elijah said to you.”

Bonnie shook her head and looked off in the opposite direction. Was she thinking or being her obstinate self? She finally turned back. “Can’t exactly say.”

“And why not?”

One hand went to her hip, and she squinted and pursed her lips. Cecelia hated that expression.

“Because he asked me if I could keep a secret. And I told him I

could. So there. I'm bound by my honor not to divulge Elijah's private conversation with me, and there isn't anything you can do about it."

"Why you little –"

"I can tell you...." She smiled a stupid superior grin and raised her chin. "Wait. I almost forgot. My pay. Now what else can you offer if I come with you every day? And tell you what I can about what I know?"

"Forget that for now. So there is something you're able to tell me concerning what you and he talked about?"

"Oh...that..." She sighed and stared dead ahead. "Well, it was about you."

That was good. Right? "So what did he say?"

"CeCe, you know what store Daddy puts on keeping one's word. Am I going to have to tell him you're trying to get me to break a confidence?"

Such a brat. How did she get so smart so fast? Cecelia and Gwen were what? Twelve and fourteen when they used to....

Oh, mercy. It hit her between the eyes. She was reaping what she and Gwen used to sow with Rebecca. And even Mary Rachel to a certain extent. She hated being on the big sister side of that coin. She needed to outsmart her some way.

Hey, there was an idea.

She'd figure out an excuse to ship Bonnie off to live with Wallace and Rebecca until Elijah asked her to marry him. Would she have to let her oldest sister in on the plan? Would Rebecca be of a mind to help her?

She toyed with that idea for a quarter mile. But if she could rid herself of Bonnie, Houston might even be worse. And he probably couldn't be bribed nearly as easily either. What about Charlie?

No, he'd be an even bigger pain. Last time the Rusks came to dinner, her brother-in-law was all about how busy he was with the planting. Maybe that could work in her favor.

"Fine. I'll not badger you to break a confidence. But if there's a way you could like...give me a hint or...."

"No guessing. Or hints. Now stop trying to weasel it out of me."

"Fine. But one day...." She let the threat trail off, then when Bonnie didn't take the bait, turned her attention to her father. Pigheaded man had to punish her and her sisters just because of Mary Rachel running off. It wasn't fair.

Her father's oft spoke words danced across her memory: 'Life isn't always fair.'

How could she sugar-up this situation?

Why'd he go and shoot his mouth off about having to be eighteen to be courted? Hmm. Maybe she knew a way around Mister Henry

Buckmeyer. Mama May! As a woman, she'd surely understand. But would she agree to wield her considerable influence over the man to change his mind?

Though in some quarters Cecelia would already be considered an old maid, that tact wouldn't likely hold water with a lady who hadn't married at all until she was forty-one—and so beautiful. Why had she?

None of her sisters could believe she was that old when they found out on the trip to Europe. They'd guessed more like in her early thirties.

No, she had to figure out another way to get Mama May to change Daddy's mind.

Eleven months was too long to wait. Besides, Gwen would have a whole year of eligibility to flirt with him before Cecelia came of age. No. She had to take matters into her own hands. Wasn't it somewhere in the Bible? Strike while the iron's hot?



Gwendolyn set the bowl of mixed greens seasoned with ham hock—and only Jewel knew what else—on the supper table.

Some fine day, when the right man came courting, the one her father would approve of, who would sweep her off her feet and down the aisle, then and only then she could eat all she wanted.

It was altogether wrong that the men could wolf down piles of food and never gain an ounce. She strolled back as CeCe and Bonnie hurried past as though running some race. So immature!

Acted like whoever put the most food on the table got an extra piece of pie or something. CeCe returned first, but instead of grabbing the plate of fried tomatoes, she stopped next to her and leaned in.

“Who’s the gent sitting next to Elijah?”

“A timber buyer Daddy’s showing around tomorrow.”

“Why? We’re not selling any of our land, are we?”

“How would I know? And who cares anyway?” She hadn’t intended for her tone to sound so irritated.

Even though she’d only been ten when her mama passed, she remembered her always saying that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Gwen nodded toward the plate, but her sister didn’t respond.

Seemed the older Cecelia got, the harder she was to control.

Mama May reached in and grabbed the tomatoes. “Come on, ladies. Everything’s ready.”

Instead of calling on anyone to bless the food, her daddy stood and waited a few seconds while the hubbub died down to only

Houston's blabber with Bart. Bonnie poked him and both hushed.

"Everyone, this is Braxton Hightower. He's come to Red River County looking for timberland and will be staying with us for a while."

Starting with Mama May, he introduced the whole clan right down the line and up the other side, ending with her. Mister Hightower smiled from the far end and nodded. But then instead of looking away, he held her gaze.

His intensity caused her to lower her eyes. The man was too... what? She glanced back, and he looked away, but wore a slight winner's grin.

Had it been a game?

Humph.

A little arrogant it seemed. She hadn't been playing a game with the dandy, not after just meeting him. After all! A bowl of cream peas came around. She dipped out only one spoonful, then made herself pass it on.

And like a man, CeCe could eat whatever she wanted and never had trouble buttoning anything. Gwen hated it.

Bonnie was almost as bad, but she was growing so fast. She stabbed two peeled tomato slices and sighed. Mama May understood about watching her weight, but she was married, so what did it matter?

Daddy wouldn't love her any less. Finally, the plates of food stopped whizzing past her nose.

Taking a dainty lady-like bite, she smiled at Elijah. After washing that down, she cleared her throat and patted her lips. "How was your day, Mister Eversole?"

He glanced up and finished chewing while giving her a wait-just-a-minute finger. "Good, real good. Got a lot done today. Hoping the boiler arrives tomorrow."

She could care less about the saw mill, but asked about it anyway to let Braxton know he was not the only eligible man at the table. Hmm. Or was he? She'd assumed....

For the next few minutes, Elijah talked instead of eating while she snuck peeks at the stranger beside him at the other end of the table. She liked the way the Californian explained things, almost had her interested in the mill's working.

Then Braxton asked a question and instead of talking to her, Eversole delved into a conversation with the mystery man and her father.

Worked pretty well for her. Without being caught, throughout supper she kept taking little studies of the man from who knew where. She wouldn't call him handsome really, not as good-looking as Elijah,

for certain.

She looked a little longer during dessert, Mammy's—she meant Miss Jewel, was she ever going to get used to the cook's beautiful new name?—skillet apple pie seemed to keep him pretty focused.

But soon as he shoveled in the last bite, he glanced straight up at her. She went to Daddy's conversation with May, feigning interest.

Actually, Braxton wasn't bad looking either, in a rugged kind of way. She liked his square jaw and the cleft in his chin like Daddy's. She'd heard that signified strength.

Oh, fiddles, what was she going on about? was the better catch of the two. That was obvious. Really, just because he'd held her gaze then smiled? Where was he from anyway? And why had Daddy invited him to stay there?

Gracious.

"So where you from, Mister Hightower?"

"Well, been spending some time at the Capitol of late."

"Austin? Really? It's such a beautiful city, don't you think so? Did you see the bat cave?" Mercy, take a breath, Gwendolyn Belle. He would think her addle-minded.

"No, ma'am. I've been to the nation's Capitol, Washington D.C. I'm from New York."

"Oh, I see. So who is it needs trees?"

"Everyone needs lumber. Father's partners have plans for a dozen mills, but we need timber by the train loads."

Humph. Big money man, Hightower probably had plenty of women swooning all over him in every state and territory he went. But if so, why would he flirt like that?

And why chance it right in front of her father, too. It'd be safe to call him daring. She liked that.

Or maybe he'd come hunting more than trees to cut down? Maybe he'd already talked to her father and mentioned that he might be in the market for a wife. She looked away and giggled.

No possibility of that, not with her father. If Braxton mentioned anything of the sort, Daddy'd have his shotgun out, chasing him the other way.

Certainly not having him for dinner!

Chapter Five



Henry bid his two houseguests a goodnight then strolled to his library, except May used it more than he did of late.

Perhaps he should reconsider the plans for his new home, make enough room for two desks or either get one of those double ones where he could face his bride while working.

Stopping at the door, he studied the dark-haired beauty as her feather pen worked its wonder on the stark white page. He loved watching her write, be so creative, and put out stories that women all around the world enjoyed.

How had he been so blessed to have two such wonderful women to wife?

She reached toward the inkwell, then must have spotted him for she looked up and smiled. "Ready for bed? I'm almost finished with this scene."

"Anytime." He eased into the wingback. "Got some pages for me to read?"

She handed him a few. "That would be wonderful. Bonnie isn't telling me anything but 'I love it, Mama.' "

He nodded, grinning, and took the offering then readjusted in the chair toward the light. He finished the last page and glanced up.

His wife stared, waiting it seemed. "Well, is it any good?"

He smiled then said in his best little boy voice. "I love it, Mama."

Mercy, how he loved those smiles. "Oh, you!" She laughed. "Don't do that. Are you being serious?"

He nodded. "Except...seems to me..." He looked off, hunting the exact right way to say it. Well, the word said the truth would set you free, so.... "I never fancied myself a pirate, but do I have to have a chicken feather in my hat?"

"No! You aren't the Red Rooster."

"Oh? Then who were you thinking of when you penned this line?" He held out the second page and scanned it then touched her neat cursive about mid-way. "I've killed seven men do you want to be number eight?"

"Oh. Hmm. Well, uh...oh, fine. I'll change it, but my love, you'd make a grand swashbuckler, and I have promised the children. You'd be an even better president or king. Want any of those jobs?"

"I'd take king tomorrow. But that isn't going to happen."

"What about president of these United States? That is a definite possibility. You could. Do so much...for the whole country."

"Oh, I've thought on it some. Even before Hightower showed up. But reality keeps nipping at my heels."

"What reality? Anyone who knows you can see you'd make a great president, and we could..." She smiled. "Free all the slaves."

"That's the whole crux of it. The Whigs are breaking apart over that exact issue. Horace Greely's clamoring for a new party, expressly for achieving just that. Put an end to it. And the Democrats are entrenched. Those who don't see things our way would vilify me... us...in those rags of theirs."

"So? No sticks or stones, only words... Didn't your mama teach you anything?"

"Ask Jackson about how bad words can hurt."

"But look at the good he did."

He scooted to the edge of his chair. "How about Mary Rachel? Think she'd like her story to be splashed across front pages from San Francisco to New York? What kind of field day would they have with my killing...? Or worse, what if one of them searched your past and guessed about your parents? It doesn't have to be true for some of them to put it in print."

"But, Henry—"

"If just one of your cousins got hold of that... Nothing would stop them from getting their claws into you."

She exhaled, obviously not pleased with his response.

Opening his desk drawer, she pulled out a silver dollar. "I'm not afraid of them or anybody else. Want to toss for it?" She flipped the coin. "Heads we run, tails we keep on thinking about."

"What if it lands on its edge?"

"Then it's an absolute no."

"Let's just call it tails, and we'll keep on thinking on it. '60 is a long way off."

"Hey, who said we had to wait until then? Another chief executive gets elected in '56."

"Too soon. No, '60 would be the earliest, and by then maybe you'd have Crockett weaned." He grinned and winked. Hopefully, his calculations were accurate.

She smirked then a realization obviously dawned. "Perhaps." She smiled then stood. "He's spending the night with Gwendolyn."

"Wonderful." He held his hand out.

"Did you happen to notice the exchange between Braxton and our debutante?"

Of its own, his hand fell to his side. "No. What? Did he say

anything? Is every single man a prospect I need to watch out for? And when are you talking about?"

"Nothing was said, but are you blind?"

"No."

"Well, I assure you, she considers the man a prospect. They exchanged glances all through dinner. Really, sweetheart, you don't think every single man who darkens our door is a prospect? Why, as beautiful as our daughters are –"

"But they're still babies."

"No. They are not. Anyway, Mister Buckmeyer, you told me you had read every one of my novels."

"I have."

"Didn't you learn anything? It's all there. And, I tell you true, it isn't only the gents you need to be concerned with. Gwen and CeCe... Well, I may not spell it out exactly, but if you'd paid any attention, you could understand how love works."

"Love? So now they're in love?" How was he supposed to know these things? He'd only loved two women in his life who weren't kin. "So should I shoot Braxton now or later?"

She shook her head. "Look, you cannot keep any of them under your wings forever. At first blush, Mister Hightower appears totally eligible, and if you like him, he could be the answer for our love triangle woes between the girls."

"I don't like it."

"Still, I think it'd be wise to have a talk with him in the morning."

"What about Elijah and Cecelia? Were they sparking, too?"

"Of course, but with a bit more subtlety. I'm certain, due to her not being of your courting age yet."

He wasn't sure about her tone. "What are you implying?"

"Darling, in some circles, Cecelia could already be considered an old maid –"

"But she's barely seventeen."

"Yes, sir, the ripe old age of seventeen. Many of my heroines are her age when they meet their true love. I mean, if there's an interest, and if you approve of the young man, nothing says they have to get married next week."

"Doesn't mean they shouldn't be. Talk to their fathers."

"Your tenet is pretty strict."

Was that his wife or daughter talking? "I like it fine."

"She hates it, and so will Bonnie in a few years."

He extended his hand, and she took it. "Shall we continue this conversation at a more convenient time?"

She scooted ahead and pulled him toward the bed.

Mercy, Lord, you have blessed me beyond measure.



Cecelia pushed herself off the floor, dusted off her dress then put her listening glass back in the linen cabinet.

Bless Mama May's heart. Bless it, God. She twirled from the water closet then held her hands together on her chest with an imaginary bouquet. She'd be walking the aisle in no time. If she could just get Elijah to ask.

She eased on out of her room, strolled down the hall to Gwen's, then tapped real light on the door and waited. Socked footfalls sounded before her sister's pretty head appeared. "He just went to sleep, so be quiet."

Cecelia watched Gwen throw a dozen and a half stitches, then the youngest Buckmeyer's breathing slowed, and he rolled over on the bed, sleep-suckling.

Setting her needlework in her lap, she leaned in. "Well? What'd they say?"

"Mama May saw you and Braxton making eyes, and me and Elijah, too, after I was so careful. But on the good side, she took my hint, and started working on him about his stupid rule."

"Did they say how long Mister Hightower is staying? If I have just a few days, I need to know."

"No, didn't mention anything about that, but Uncle Chester told Miss Jewel that Braxton is here for more than timber."

Gwen smiled. "Like courting? Mama say anything to that?"

"Only talked like she knew it to be true. I'd say if he had come for timber only, he's certainly altered his original intent. He may be... anyway, Uncle said he knows of a Hightower big into politics back east. He's thinking Braxton is that man's son and came to get Daddy to stand for office."

"Really? Governor?"

"I don't know, maybe in Washington."

"Oh, he'd never leave Texas."

"Uncle mentioned the Whig party splitting over slavery, claimed there's a big time New York newspaper man who's clamoring for emancipation."

"Oh, well, Daddy would never move east, so let's get back to Braxton Hightower and Elijah. You hear anything else?"

A light tap on the door silenced Cecelia. Gwen ordered her to see who it was with a look and a nod. Halfway there, the door slipped open. Bonnie's cute little noggin appeared. She smiled then mouthed, is he asleep?



“See you tomorrow.” Elijah tipped his hat at both men as they rode out of the barn. He didn’t care much for Hightower and Henry riding off together. He’d noted clear enough the looks the girls had been throwing the man’s way.

Gwen, he didn’t mind too much, but what if things didn’t work out with him and Cecelia. He’d hate to have to wait on Bonnie to grow up. But if he did, wouldn’t that be a story to tell their babies?

Children. Were the little scalawags his prime motivation in wanting a wife? As he finished up harnessing his gelding, he debated the point with himself. And, as with the thousand other times, came to no definite conclusions.

All he knew full well is that he wanted a wife. One as smart and pretty and Godly as Mary Rachel. So here he was in Texas, building her father a steam engine, hoping to leave with one of her sisters.

“Hey, Elijah.” The very youngest of the same said ladies hurried toward him.

He turned. “Hey yourself, Bonnie Claire.”

“You remembered.” She grinned with her two front teeth still bigger than her mouth.

“Yes, ma’am, of course I did. We are partners after all.”

“Yes, sir. We certainly are.” She stopped short, looked both ways and behind her, then leaned in. “CeCe and Gwen were talking about you and Mister Hightower last night.”

He winked. “Anything you care to pass along?”

“Well, it appears Gwen says she wants that Braxton Hightower if Daddy likes him enough, but she would not tell you no, if you were to ask her first.”

“What did Cecelia say to that?”

“Nothing.”

“Did she seem upset?”

“Some. You know about Daddy’s courting age rule. But CeCe’s working on Mama to get Daddy to change his pigheaded mind. So, unless you’re willing to wait, she can’t say much anyway.”

“That right?”

“Um-hum. Gwen’s the only one old enough to have suitors until next April when Cecelia turns eighteen, too.” She closed one eye and bore into him with the opened one. “So, are you?”

“What?”

“Willing to wait? Or are you going to go ahead and ask Gwen?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

He liked the little miss, but she didn't know when to stop asking questions. Still, he couldn't annoy her, she was too valuable an asset. “So are you and Cecelia coming today?”

She seemed disappointed he changed the subject without answering her, but like the intelligent young lady she appeared to be, didn't press it. “We're still talking about it, but I'd say probably yes.”

He motioned toward the door. “Best get on back then. Wouldn't want you to get into trouble.”

She curtsied, smiled, then hurried to the door where she stopped and turned. “I think CeCe's in love with you.”

Chapter Six



Clay Briggs rounded the corner, reined his gelding to a stop, and stared at the big house. He had to make Mister Henry understand. He'd have no life if the man wouldn't let him make Gwendolyn Belle his wife.

He'd thought long and hard on it and had to make her father see. He filled his lungs, stiffened his back, then touched his spurs to the horse's flanks.

One of the boys playing marbles spotted him and ran into the house. The other young'un, the darker skinned one—Bart, if memory served—glared at him with those ebony eyes as he dismounted.

"Didn't Untle Henry run you off?"

"That he did, but I'm back. Is he here?"

The front door opened, and Gwen's stepmother swept out. "Clay, what brings you here?"

He willed his voice calm, cleared his throat. "I've come to speak with Mister Henry, ma'am. I'd sure appreciate a word with him if that's possible."

"Well, I'm sorry you rode all this way, but I'm afraid it isn't. At least not today. He and Braxton Hightower are out scouting timberland."

Clay had no idea who Hightower was, but it didn't matter. "When do you expect him back?"

"Not until tomorrow afternoon."

He studied his boots. He'd gone home then turned right around and came back. What was he going to do now? He glanced to the second floor window. Gwendolyn stared down from her lofty perch.

Cecelia stood next to her, and the littlest daughter on the other side. His heart swelled at the sight of her, but instead of staring—all he wanted to do in the world—he tore his eyes off the beauty and faced Henry's new wife.

"Ma'am, I rode all the way home. Didn't stay more than an hour then came right back. I can't bear the thought of leaving again without speaking to Mister Henry. Might it be possible for me to wait until your husband returns?"

She nodded toward the rockers and sat in the smaller of the two. He joined her.

“Why’d you come back, Clay?”

“I wanted to tell Mister Henry that he’s right. I do need to get right with the Lord. And that I’ll buckle down. I’m more than willing, ma’am. I’ll do anything to win Gwen’s hand.”

“Neither one of us liked you getting so angry the other day.”

“Yes, ma’am. I was wrong, and it’s truly been gnawing at me. I’m here to scarf down a little humble pie and beg for another chance.”

“Have you met Elijah Eversole?”

“No, ma’am. He from these parts?”

“He’s Mary Rachel and Jethro Risen’s partner come from California to build us a new steam engine for our sawmill. You can go help him and the cousins work to pay for your keep and one night in the bunkhouse, and you can stay until my husband returns tomorrow.”

Clay jumped to his feet. “Yes, ma’am! Where are they?”

She told him.

He practically clicked his heels and skipped down the porch steps then swung into the saddle.

“Thank you, ma’am. I really appreciate this.” He tipped his hat at Gwen and her sisters then grinned at their stepmother again. “I mean it. Thank you much.”

She chuckled. “You’re welcome. Now I’m putting my trust in your honor, Clay. Don’t you disappoint me and get me in trouble with her daddy.”

“Oh no, ma’am. I won’t.”

And off he went, his heart so light and free it might fly right out of his chest. He got what he came after. Another chance. He’d not let his stupid pride get in the way this time. Or his temper either.

The prize was too great, and the man had pegged him true. His soul needed a good dose of the Lord.

Looking skyward, he put a hand on his chest over his heart.

“Thank You, too. Help me.”

After introductions and a solid handshake—Clay hated dead fish greetings—the Californian impressed him with his mechanical knowledge and easy manner with the men.

By dinner time, he decided he liked this Elijah Eversole, provided he didn’t have eyes for Gwendolyn. Couldn’t think of a thing he’d hate more.

But before he could discern if the man had any intentions other than building the engine and hightailing it back to the gold fields, his love and her two sisters came over the far ridge in a one-horse surrey.

What a sight.

Even baby girl was blooming into a beautiful young lady, but Gwendolyn and her sister were even better looking.



Bonnie grabbed both her big sisters' arms. "You two best behave. I gave Mama my word."

CeCe shot her a smirk. The one she hated the most. "We know, Bonnie Claire. You've already told us three times now."

"Hush, girls. They'll hear."

Bonnie didn't much like taking orders from either of them, but especially hated it when Gwen lorded it over her. She was only six years older.

"Yes, Mother." She enjoyed the ire her sarcasm brought and especially loved it that her sister couldn't do anything about it, not with Clay and Elijah right in front of her.

The oldest looked at her, smiled then whispered, "Be good, or we'll both get you later."

She smiled right back. "You do, and you can forget me chaperoning again, no matter how much you pay." She stood and waved. "Hey, Clay! You and Elijah hungry? We brought dinner."

Of course, they were. And not just for the fried chicken and potato salad. Those fellows drooled all over her big sisters. She didn't get it. What was the hullabaloo all about? She hated it that neither paid her much attention.

At least, it did give her an opportunity to study the men a bit. For her money, Clay was the better looking, but Elijah the nicer.

If she got to choose, if she even wanted to, she'd take Clay. No, Elijah. No...maybe she'd be like Gwen and just say yes to the first one who asked, that already had Daddy's blessing. But for sure it wouldn't be Braxton Hightower. She wouldn't take him, no matter what.

As if those cousins hated the little picnic, they stayed to themselves then started back to work way before her sisters and their beaux even got to the apple pie. Yuh-uh-um. She loved Miss Jewel's skillet apple pie!

The minute she finished hers, Bonnie jumped to her feet. "Well, we've got to go. I promised Mama."

"Sit yourself right back down, Bonnie Claire." Gwen glared. "We've got time. They aren't even through with their chicken!"

"Not to mention the apple pie we brought for them." CeCe shot her the shut-your-mouth look.

But Bonnie only put her hands on her hips and gave back better than she got. "I. Promised. Mama."

With a wink, Elijah came to her rescue. Standing, he escorted her and her sisters to the surrey. He did keep the dessert, though.

Once Gwen got the horse out of earshot, she turned on Bonnie, but the mean words didn't bother her at all. Elijah loved her, she was sure of it. Otherwise, why would he keep winking at her?

And come to her rescue like he did?

Somehow she needed to convince him to wait. She'd be thirteen in December. It'd only be five years after that. Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and counted it as nothing, like it was only a few days.

And maybe she and Mama could convince Daddy that fifteen was old enough to get married. That would only be two and a half years away.

Judy Goldthwaite got married at fourteen, and hers seemed like a fine little family.

"Are you paying me any mind?"

Bonnie closed one eye and studied on Gwen, but couldn't recall what she'd been talking about. "Sorry, what?"

"I've been telling you how the cow ate the cabbage for at least half a mile now. Have you been daydreaming all this time?"

She wouldn't lie, but wasn't about to tell either of her sisters what she'd just figured out. Let them fight over Clay and Braxton. Elijah Eversole was hers.

"Bonnie, you need to respect your elders."

She pursed her lips and looked off. They both needed her and that was that.



Cecelia rolled over then pulled her second pillow in tight, but her eyes refused to stay closed. Dinner had gone well, except Miss Smarty Bloomers had to cut it short.

She sighed. Supper had been a complete disaster, as if Elijah entered in to some kind of contest with Clay over Gwen. Cecelia's true love had hardly looked at her the whole meal.

Then after the dishes were done and put away, while Mama May let them visit over milk and cookies in the parlor, he hardly said two words to her.

It was all her daddy's fault! Him and his stupid, pigheaded, unfair rules! That had to be it. Elijah was afraid of her father, too, but then what sane man wasn't?

Everyone knew about all the men he'd killed over the years. The last one right there in the hall when those idiots tried to steal Rose and Charley and take them back to Bold Eagle. What a scary night that had been!

Especially at only twelve years old, Bonnie's age now. But it did

warm her heart to know no one could get past Henry Buckmeyer.

Then that was the problem, too.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. It hit her. Her daddy was gone! Looking at timberland with Braxton Hightower. Tonight was her one chance.

Now who was being the idiot?

Her heart boomed in her chest. Could she? Should she? It really was her only chance. He'd hear her for sure once he got home.

It was now or never.

Elijah had said only another two weeks, three at the most, and he'd have the new steam engine working. Before she knew it, he'd be gone back to California.

Maybe she could go back with him for a visit? No. Daddy would never allow that.

She rolled out of bed, lit the oil lamp, then threw on her housecoat and pulled her hair out from under it. She glanced in her looking glass, fluffed her locks, and pinched her cheeks. Probably couldn't even get through the scuttle hole anymore.

It'd been what? Three years since the last time she and Charley were in the attic?

She missed that little booger. She grinned. Forever trying to get her into something. Shame Levi and Rose decided to build their own home. She liked it better when they all lived together.

Lifting and carrying her vanity chair into her water closet, she placed it right under the hole then went for the broom in the corner. Using it, she pushed the trapdoor out of its square frame.

It made too loud a scraping noise, and for a moment her heart stopped. She held her breath, but heard nothing more.

Then the booming in her chest doubled. She swallowed.

No, she wasn't doing anything wrong. Right? She just needed a private word with Elijah. She had to let him know waiting for her would be worth it. And if Mama May could only get through to her father, it wouldn't be the whole ten months.

He had to know.

Climbing up onto the chair, she suddenly remembered how dark it would be up there, so she stepped back down and retrieved a candle and matches.

Then, with one foot on the chair's bottom and the other on the back, she stretched tall, feeling around the opening's edge. Her fingers touched the rope ladder, grasped it, then pulled it down.

After a good hard test yank, she put her whole weight on it and swung. Good. Just like the last time. Nothing to it. She'd be in Elijah's room...her breath caught.

The booming doubled, beating hard against her chest.

Making herself breathe, she forced deep, calming breaths. She had to stop being silly.

She wasn't doing anything wrong.

Talking was no sin, and this was her only chance.



The overhead patter turned Elijah away from his drawing.

Squirrels? Have to be awful big ones.

Maybe an opossum. He went back to his sketch, then a soft thud echoed. He looked toward the sound and his water closet door opened. He blinked, but Cecelia didn't vanish. "What...?"

She put a finger to her lips and beckoned him with the other hand.

He hurried to her then whispered, "What are you doing here?"

She leaned in too close. Her gorgeous mouth mere inches from his cheek. "I needed to talk with you in private. I have to."

He nodded. He wanted the same thing. But forbidden fruit could get him in all sorts of trouble, just like it had Adam. "Your daddy will skin us both if anyone catches you in here. It's such a risk. What's so important?"

She put her hand on his chest. Could she feel how hard his heart was beating? It practically thundered as though it wanted to jump right out of his chest and be caressed. She could handle that, he was certain, and be gentle about it, too.

What was she doing in his room? What was she thinking, taking such a chance?

"He won't. He's gone, remember? And besides, Mama is working on him. I mean about me not being eighteen yet. But even if he refuses to give in...I had to come and get your promise."

"For what?"

Even in the pale lamp light, her smile radiated. "That you'll wait for me."

Wait for her? She had to get out of there.

"CeCe, you've got to go. If you're caught...." Her lips turned down, then puckered, but as much as he wanted to smother them with kisses, he dared not. She inched closer, but still, his resolve held.

Then she pressed those soft, full lips against his, and he closed his eyes.

Time stopped, as did his world.

Only his heart kept at its crazy pace, beating for the band.

She pushed away. "I promise you, I'm worth waiting for, Mister Eversole."

He nodded, not trusting his voice. With all his will power—or was it God's? In his weakness God was made strong. Isn't that what the Good Book said?—he backed away. For a few frantic beats of his heart, she stood there.

“Promise me, please. Tell me you'll wait for me.”

“I, uh...” He nodded again.

The biggest happiest grin stretched across her face. “I love you.” Then she turned and disappeared into his water closet and the door closed.

His feet, in cahoots with his lips, begged to follow. He took a step toward the door, but the bit of sanity he still possessed managed to stop him. He wanted a wife, a beautiful intelligent woman just like Cecelia Buckmeyer, to share his life, not a sinful night of passion.

Into the wee hours, he wrestled himself. Did Cecelia really love him? He'd only just met her, and she'd barely spent a few hours in his company. How could she love him? How could she know?

And was he really in love with Mary Rachel and only trying to replace her with one of her sisters?

What of Gwendolyn? She'd seemed more interested in him of late. And his little informant had said she wouldn't tell him no if he asked. But then, none of the girls could marry without their father's blessings.

Could they? Would they?

And there was Clay. She might love him, but Henry obviously didn't approve of the man.

Would he approve of Elijah? He thought he would, at least that he had a good chance of winning his approval. He stared out the window. The soft glow of the moon lit the landscape casting deep shadows.

What was he thinking? He'd been invited to build an engine for Buckmeyer, not take one of his daughters back to California.

Mary Rachel would like that. His heart swelled at the thought of her name.

Beside his bed, he knelt and clasped his hands. He was a fool, a confused imbecile. He waited until the beating in his chest subsided. Laying his forehead on the bed, he clasped his hands behind his neck. What was he to do?

Oh, Lord, guide my path. Show me who You want me to have. Your perfect choice. For it is You Who knows best the perfect one.

Chapter Seven



The wordless exchange between her uncle and her stepmother set Cecelia on edge, put a sour taste in her mouth that the honey-laced coffee couldn't cut.

Then, once the men were off to work, even before she could help Miss Jewel get their dinner to cooking, Mama May asked her so sweetly and nice if she could have a word with her in Daddy's library.

Oh, Lord, she was found out!

She hadn't meant to make so much noise last night.

"Of course, Mama. Now?" Did she say that just right? Would the perceptive woman hear guilt in her tone? But then, she hadn't done anything wrong. One little kiss. That's all it was. And she was going to marry the man.

"Yes, please. I'd like the word before you father returns home."

With a nod, Cecelia gathered herself and smiled.

Oh, Lord, was she going to tell Daddy? Please don't let her tell him, Lord.

Willing her lips into a scant smile, she met her eyes, but looked quickly away as tears suddenly threatened to fill and overflow.

"Yes, ma'am." She couldn't cry. Tears wouldn't help! They'd only give her away. She opened her eyes wide, trying to dissipate them.

Mama May held the door until Cecelia stepped inside, gestured her toward the wingback, then took her father's seat. "Sweetheart, your Uncle Chester tells me he heard someone in the attic last night. Someone about your size, he figures."

A lie streaked across her tongue, but she refused to give it voice. No reason to dig her hole any deeper. Instead, she forced her face blank and found a spot on the wall to stare at. "He did?"

"Yes, indeed, he did." Mama May looked away and sighed.

"Then...he heard a thud when the young lady lowered herself into Mister Eversole's room."

Cecelia's breath caught in her throat. Had the gasp been out loud? She was dead. Except her life hadn't flashed before her eyes. More tears welled, too many to keep from falling.

A lump formed in her throat, holding back her voice. Helpless against it, all her words gathered up and choked her. She finally managed to swallow, and they came pouring out on top each other.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I’m so sorry, but I didn’t do anything wrong there. I just needed to talk. In private. Tell Elijah something.” The flood gates opened, and she sobbed into her hands.



May reached over the desk and offered a handkerchief trimmed in cotton lace from her pocket. “Here.”

The girl took it, and for a bit, she let her cry. Then once she regained some control, leaned forward. “CeCe, would Elijah tell your father the same story?”

The poor thing looked up with such a pitiful expression and nodded. “But please! Please don’t tell Daddy. You just can’t, Mama! He’ll...” She dropped her chin to her chest and covered her face with both hands.

Could May keep it from Henry?

Even if she wanted to for her daughter’s sake, she just couldn’t see how she could possibly withhold the incident. Hopefully though, she would be able to keep him from going berserk. Had the late night been innocent as she claimed, or did the darling’s silence point to something more sinister?

“Cecelia?”

She looked up again, eyes red and puffy, and dabbed the hanky under them. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Was that my answer or a question?”

“Ma’am?”

“Would Elijah tell your father the same story?”

Her head hung again. “No, ma’am, probably not.” She looked up, remorse written all over her face. “If telling the truth, he would add that I kissed him. But he didn’t kiss me back! It was a short kiss. You know. Just a short, sweet kiss.”

“Why, baby? Why would you take such a chance?”

“Oh, Mama May, I had to tell him to wait for me. That you were working on Daddy. He’d been making eyes at Gwen all through supper, and...and...not hardly paying me any attention. But I knew that first morning he came that I loved him. It was love at first sight. I thought for both of us. I could tell, but Daddy’s rule. And Clay coming back!”

“I’d think Clay’s return would be a good thing.”

“Didn’t you see? It was like Elijah had to best him or something. I’m telling you he hardly looked at me the whole meal! Oh, Mama, what am I going to do? I can’t live without him.”

“Did he say he’d wait for you?”

Her shoulders barely lifted, and her eyes went to the floor. “Not

really. Not as I'd hoped, but he nodded like he would. I took it as a yes."

"Sweetie, if we can't get your father to change his mind, then you're talking ten months before he can even begin to court you, and then how long after that before your father would agree to a wedding?"

"But no matter how long...I can wait as long as I know he'll be mine. Can't he?"

"Well, I'm not sure. You've only just met him, and you're talking forever. His life is in California. Have you thought about that? Are you ready to move there?"

"But he could stay here. And...how long after you met Daddy did you know? I mean that he was the one."

May smiled. Henry's baby girl hadn't fallen too far from her father's tree. "From the start, I wanted to get to know him better, but..." She sat back. "Most times, a wife goes where her husband does."

"But not always, and of course, I want to know everything about Elijah! But I only get to see him a few minutes each day. You and Daddy spent a lot of time together alone before you got married."

"True, but your father is a man of honor."

"Didn't last night prove Elijah is as well? I mean when I kissed him, he could have kissed me back, or worse, but he didn't. Doesn't that prove something...at least to you?"

"So do you want to be the one to tell your father all of this?"

She settled back in the chair and shook her head. "Oh, no. He can't know any of it."

"What would you have done if Mister Eversole had kissed you back?"

"I don't know. I asked myself the same question last night." The girl turned and stared out the window. The curtains waved in the breeze. The distant voices of playing children rode on it.

"Cecelia?"

She looked back. "I wanted him to, and it did hurt my heart that he didn't. Still...I am certain. I would have stopped it, left. I would have made him let me go."

"Through all the centuries, sweetheart, there are countless young ladies who've thought the same thing, then didn't. You've got to promise me you'll never put yourself in that position again."

"Yes, ma'am, I promise." The girl's eyes brightened, then clouded just as quick. She scooted to the edge of her seat. "And you won't tell Daddy?"

"I didn't say that. But thank you for your promise."

"Oh please. He doesn't need to know, does he?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm leaning toward keeping this between us."

CeCe exhaled. "That would be boss, even better than that, it would be wonderful, Mama."

For the fourth time, the beautiful young lady had dropped the May and just called her Mama.

Was it only an enticement? Could Cecelia possibly know how very much she wanted her and Gwendolyn to call her just Mama? Bonnie and Houston had, even before she married their father, but they were really too young to remember Sue.

A knock on the door pulled her attention from the seventeen-year-old. "Yes? Come in."

Gwen opened the door holding Crocket. "He wants his mama."

The boy almost flopped out of her arms, leaning and stretching his little hands toward her. "Mama."

She stood and took the baby then smiled at Cecelia. "Best go see if Miss Jewel needs any help. It'll soon be time to take the men their dinner."

Both girls turned and headed toward the door.

"Oh, and would you please ask Bonnie to come see me in half an hour or so?"



Bonnie heard them before they stormed into the parlor, but ignored them completely. She handed Lacey Rose the fancy China tea cup on a saucer. "Here you are, Miss Lacey. Would you care for a crumpet?"

The eight-year-old glanced at the door, grinned then took the offering. "Please. How kind of you to offer. I would love a crumpet with strawberry jam, please, if you have it. And thank you, Miss Buckmeyer."

"Mama May wants you, Bonnie."

She shrugged. "Fine. I'll go when we're through with our tea party."

"She said to have you come in about thirty minutes and that will be in five more, so don't doddle." She hated Gwen's tone, as though she was her mother or something. God had sent Mama to replace her real one who she barely remembered.

And Gwendolyn was only her third oldest sister.

She faced the interlopers. She'd love it if those two were distant cousins, and she the oldest. Lacey Rose could be her baby sister instead of just her friend. "Mama letting you take dinner to the sawmill?"

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't she?"

Rising out of the too-small chair, the one Uncle Wallace had made his namesake for her sixth birthday, she straightened her church skirt. Shame he hadn't built it a bit bigger. Lacey Rose could still get up and down pretty easy, but it'd become a chore for her.

"So what's my offer to go today?"

"I want to go, too." Lacey jumped up. "Please, please."

Oh, no! They couldn't let her go! Then they might not need Bonnie!

"I don't know if there'd be enough room, sweetie. The sallery would already be crowded." Cecelia turned toward Bonnie. "And you...we can chaperone ourselves! There's two of us, and we can watch each other. No one will have to carry the basket in their lap that way, too. So don't you worry your thieving head any."

She squinted and glared, first at CeCe then bore a hole into Gwen. "I don't think Daddy will like that at all, not one little bit. Mama knows that, too, so she won't be standing for it. You best be about making me happy. Now I ask again, what's the offer?"

"Daddy's not here though, is he?"

Sometimes she wished she didn't have any big sisters. She wanted to be the oldest.

"Well, he will be any minute!" She huffed and put her fists on her waist. "Told Mama midday, and unless the big clock is off, it struck the half hour a while back. Be eleven before you know it."

"So? We'll be long gone before noon."

She winked at Lacey Rose, who'd sat back down, quite dejected. Brushing past CeCe with her step-aside-I've-got-business look, Bonnie noted red in her eyes as though she'd been crying.

What was that all about? Had Elijah told her? No. He hadn't had a chance to before he and Clay went to work. Had he?

She hurried to her daddy's office, or maybe she should call it Mama's. Of late, she worked in there way more than her father. But she had the pirate book to write. Probably why she wanted to see her, to give her more pages to read.

Being in on reading the book as she wrote it was fun.

After an easy rap, just in case Crocket was asleep, she peeked in. Bonnie loved the smell of old books.

"Come on in, sweetheart."

She sashayed to the far wingback and sat properly like an English lady come from high tea. "The sisters said you wanted to see me. Do you have more pages?"

"Don't you look lovely."

"Yes, ma'am. Lacey Rose and I were having a tea party."

"Well, I'm sorry to have called you away, then."

"It's alright. It was already rudely interrupted."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Your sisters want to take Elijah and Clay their dinner. Are you free to go with them?"

"Why was CeCe crying?"

"You don't miss much do you?"

"No, ma'am. Have to be observant when you're the youngest. Well, youngest sister anyway."

"I see."

"So did Elijah tell her?"

Her stepmother shook her head. Stepmother? Where had that come from? Mama was not wicked by anyone's measure, and now that Daddy had put her birth mother's picture away, Bonnie could hardly even remember what she looked like.

No, Mama was her mother now, period.

"What are you talking about?"

She shrugged. No need to say anything yet. Not until her daddy changed his pigheaded mind. "Do you remember Judy Goldthwaite? She and her husband come to church some when they can get away and Langford Creek is passable."

"Is she that young lady who got married about a year ago?"

Nodding, Bonnie smiled. "Exactly right. And they're doing just great. Got one baby now with another on the way. Her husband always looks at her like he surely adores her."

"What are you getting at, Bonnie?"

"Oh, I'm only thinking that five years and seven months is a very long time. Too long to wait." She rose then went and sat on the arm of Mama's chair, wrapping her arms around her neck. "You've got to get Daddy to change his mind."



May suppressed a laugh. That would never do. Not when Bonnie was being so serious. "I have mentioned it, but don't expect him to move much at all on his timetable. Six months would surprise me."

"But I can't wait that long! You've got to get him to understand! We're not Mary Rachel, and..." She pouted her bottom lip and shrugged. "Even that worked out great in the end. We all love Jethro Risen, and if she hadn't run off with Caleb to California, then where would she be now?"

"Doesn't the Bible say not to tempt God?"

"I think so, but how's that the same? I'm not saying to tempt Daddy at all. I only want him to agree that if the right man comes along, that just because I'm say...fifteen...he wouldn't stand in the way. Enforce his stupid rule. I know you understand."

She bit her lip to keep the smile off her face. Apparently little miss was smitten with one of the men working on the new steam engine. Didn't really matter which one. Perhaps she and Crockett should be today's chaperone.

But if the three girls went again, they could all keep an eye on each other.

Plus Chester had passed the word on to the cousins for them to not let anything happen.

"So? Can you go with your sisters today?"

"Sure. I mean yes, ma'am. I'll go."

"Thank you. Keep everyone together, and don't let them talk you into staying any later."

"Yes, ma'am." Bonnie squeezed her neck again then jumped to her feet. May needed to spend some extra time with this one about being more graceful, but that could wait. No need in giving her any false hopes about being grown up.

Bonnie eased out. One of her father's strictest rules allowed no slamming doors—especially his. May reached for her inkwell then stopped midway as a twitch stabbed her belly.

Oh, Lord, what have I done?

Chapter Eight



As promised, May's beloved returned midday. The desire to unburden her heart proved almost more than she could bear, but she held her peace through the afternoon. He brought news of Rebecca and Wallace to share and the telling of his and Braxton's trip.

Oh, his voice! The very sound of it stirred her insides, had from the start. She told him about Clay's return and her decision to let him stay over.

Then Henry's leaving for the sawmill left her alone again with her expose-or-cover predicament. Each half-hour the big clock chimed, the heaviness on her chest increased. Should she keep Cecelia's secret?

As much as she'd love to gain the dear girl's confidence and love, as much as she wanted to be her mother—a real mother, May just couldn't see trying to keep the incident from her husband.

Maybe she could talk him into not saying anything to the girl, let her be the one to take care of it...but with his input how it should be handled. If only she could impart how important it was to her.

But she'd have to take her chances. She had to tell him. Didn't she? Would she ever be able to hide anything from Henry?

Then again, why would she want to? The kind and patient man had never given her any reason to hide things from him. Quite the opposite, experience proved she could tell him anything. Still, this was different, but secrets were bad.

Anyway, hopefully, he wouldn't do anything rash.

On the way to the kitchen to help get supper ready, the aroma of Jewel's pork roast caused her tummy to roll. Hungrier than she'd thought, but she'd really been trying to eat less, too. Her clothes had been feeling a little tight of late.

The busyness helped lessen the weight of the elephant on her chest.

All the men arrived home, and she'd failed to reach any conclusive decision.

After the food got to the table, and Bonnie blessed it, everyone went to serving their plates and passing the dishes. During the meal, May distracted herself watching the young ladies watch the men and vice-versa.

Before seconds were passed, her youngest daughter gave it away that Elijah was the object of her puppy love.

And poor Gwen couldn't decide if she wanted Braxton or Clay. It tickled her how Henry stepped up his guard.

Seemed he kept the majority of his attention on young Mister Briggs, but had already relented to letting him stay for one more night. The boy must have said something right when apologizing and admitting his shortcomings.

Before he finished his plate, Elijah set his fork down and retrieved a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket.

"Mister Henry, I've been thinking about Levi Baylor and the gang of men sowing cotton I saw the other day. Got an idea for a mechanical planter." He extended the paper toward the head of the table. "If you're interested in looking it over."

Henry nodded and took the sheet passed along to him. "So you met the major?"

"Yes, sir. An impressive man."

For a few seconds, May stood and looked over Henry's shoulder while he studied the drawing. It didn't make a lot of sense to her. He wadded his napkin then put it next to his plate, scooting it out of his way. He continued examining the paper after she returned to her seat.

Finally, he looked up. "How long would this take to build?"

"A month, maybe longer. Depends on how quick I can forge the parts." Elijah smiled, glanced at Cecelia, then turned back to her father.

May covered her smile with her napkin. Could the young man be any more obvious? How cute, great fodder for one of her stories. Him coming up with a new machine to help with planting—just to stay longer for Cece's sake.

Seemed Bonnie caught their exchange, too, though. Poor baby's eyes brimmed with tears.

"What about other crops? With bigger seeds? Can you make it adjustable?"

"Haven't thought of that, but I don't see why not."

Clay pointed his fork at Elijah. "From what I've seen, Mister Henry, this man here can make about anything."

Chester and the little boys started gathering plates, and Jewel disappeared to the kitchen. She returned with one of her iron skillet apple pies. Oh, mercy, how could May resist? Well, at least she hadn't gorged on the roast.

Over peach cobbler, the men talked only of Elijah's planter, while the girls did everything short of waving their hankies to be noticed.

Braxton offered the least to the male conversation and took every opportunity to make eyes at both Gwendolyn and Cecelia, but only the

debutante seemed interested in the timber buyer.

Obviously, CeCe only hankered after Mister Eversole, who had lost himself in his mechanical intricacies. Even after dishes, the discussion continued in the parlor over coffee.

Seemed almost forever, but May finally had him all to herself in the library. She slipped into his chair and looked to the wingback.

He did as she wanted. "Did I see Gwen taking Crockett upstairs?"

"Yes, sir. She's going to be such a good mother, but then they all will. I don't know how you did it Henry—all by yourself."

"Oh, I had Rebecca and Jewel, and you've made a huge difference. So, I thought...." A bit of mirth mixed with a bemused expression ended in a big grin. "You ready for bed then?"

Figuring it best to tell him now instead of later, she inhaled. The deep breath offered cleansing, fresh encouragement. "Yes, sir, but first, we need to talk."

His lips turned down. "Can't it wait?"

"How I wish it could." She grinned. "Bonnie wants me to talk you into lowering the courting age to fifteen. Cited that little couple at church."

He closed his eyes and shook his head slowly back and forth. "What did you tell her?"

"Had to bite my lip to keep from laughing, but in the end, I told her I'd be surprised if you allowed even six months—for Cecelia's sake—much less three years."

"What did she say to that?"

"Oh, that's when she tried to use the Goldthwaite girl as an example of how being a child-bride can work out just fine."

"Did she mention the shotgun part?"

"No, I'm certain she has no idea of that. Was pregnancy the reason she got married so young?"

He nodded, then filled his lungs. "Should I talk with her?"

"No, I don't think that's necessary. We can just let it run its course."

"What course?"

His eyes always bade her to drink him in. Oh, how she loved him, but the man was so dense about matters of the heart. "It won't be easy until they're all grown and married. You know that, Henry. Don't you, dear?"

"Rebecca wasn't this hard."

"That's only because no other man met the mark you set in her eyes. Anyway, our dear Bonnie Claire thinks she's in love with Elijah."

"What? How could she? He hasn't done or said anything, has he?"

"Not that I know of. Now before I tell you what I do know, I want you to promise me that you'll sleep on any decision."

“So there’s more?” He scooted to the edge of the seat as if at the ready to spring into action. “If I need to shoot someone, I best be about it tonight.”

She chuckled. “Just sit back, and please, promise me you’ll sleep on what I’m about to tell you.”

For the longest, he didn’t move then finally eased deep into the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “I can only promise I’ll try.”

Though wanting more, she figured that might be all he could give before knowing. Hopefully, she’d made it into a mountain, and he would be relieved and consider it only a molehill once he heard the whole story.

She cleared her throat. “Last night, Cecelia snuck into the attic and visited Elijah’s room.”

He jumped to his feet and stuck out his hand. “Get my pistol. It’s in the middle drawer.”

“I know perfectly well where it is. Sit back down. Nothing happened. Mister Eversole was the perfect gentleman and sent her packing, right back to her room.”

He glared and remained standing, his hand still extended. “How do you know that?”

“Well, Chester heard someone in the attic, then the thud when she dropped down. She didn’t stay more than two minutes before tiptoeing back through the attic then into her room again.”

He pulled his hand back, but still glared, and still stood. “Did you talk to her?”

“Please, won’t you sit?” She offered the seat with an open palm.

He took the wingback again, but stayed on the edge. “Why would she do such a thing?”

“Because she’s a young woman. Certain that she’s in love. And yes, I have spoken with her. She admitted it. Claimed she had to, went because he was vying with Clay, making eyes at Gwen through supper. Cecelia wanted to make him understand she was worth waiting for.”

He exhaled. “Two minutes. Chester sure about that?”

“Positive.” She waited a few seconds as the hot blood drained from his cheeks. “Please, Henry, I have something else to tell you...the best part.”

For a bit, he just stared like how could there be any good part in the whole episode. Still on the ready, he looked as if he would act, if only he could figure out who to shoot. “Go ahead. Enlighten me.”

“CeCe said she kissed him, but he didn’t kiss her back or even lay a hand on her.”

His arms uncrossed and fell to his lap. His chin lowered to his chest. She’d never seen him so dejected, even when he first heard

Mary Rachel's news. What was he contemplating? She eased out of the chair, but he didn't look up.

"It's all my fault."

"What? No! Nothing is your fault. Nothing's happened."

He raised his head and looked at a spot over her. "There's something about Sue I never told you."

She slipped back into his chair. A flutter danced from one side of her tummy to the other, then rolled, but she kept her peace. More about Sue? What could it be? May wanted to hear what he had to say, and let him talk.

"Right after we married, she wrote me a song." He glanced at the place on the wall where her picture once hung, seemingly focused on May's bullet hole, for more of her heartbeats than she was comfortable with. Finally, he looked back. "If you want to read it, I hid it in the frame after she died."

"I never knew Sue wrote songs."

"Called it Susannah's Ballad."

"Why would you hide that, dear? It doesn't bother me that she wrote you a song."

He swallowed. "It ended with her promising...to give me a...son." His voice cracked and tears glistened in the lamplight. "I killed her, May. And now that sin is being visited on me through my girls. First Mary Rachel, and now Cecelia."

She jumped to her feet and hurried around the desk then knelt beside him.

"Cecelia is not Mary Rachel, and they're both good girls, Henry. You've raised wonderful young ladies. We all make mistakes, but God watches over us. He watched over Mary Rachel, bringing Jethro Risen into her life, and now He's sent Elijah for Cecelia."

The chuckle that escaped could only be described as sad. "I'd tell Sue, no. Then she'd sing that song, 'Hallelu, hallelu! Oh, how I love you!' With each baby girl, she'd tell me it was getting easier." He rested his elbow on the armrest and dropped his head into his palm. "Her love...the promise...I killed her, May."

Oh, God.

Suddenly she understood why he was so adamant about her having only one baby.

She rose and extended her hand. "Come on. It's time we went to bed."

He took her hand but resisted her tug.

She raised both eyebrows, and he let her pull him out of the chair. Please. Don't let him ask any questions, Lord.



Henry beat the rooster up, but only by half a cup's worth of coffee. Midway around the home section, it hit him. His calculations were not off.

Dear Lord, have I gone and done it again?

It couldn't be. Maybe something else....

Instead of asking Father God for wisdom and understanding, as he had been, he glared at the brightening eastern sky. "Take me instead. Not May. I couldn't bear it again."

Once back to the barn, with no signs spotted, as he brushed out the Black, the Lord pierced his heart, and he repented.

"Forgive me, Father. I can do all thing through Christ who strengthens me. Your will, not mine." A peace settled over his heart as he worked on the stallion. Things would turn out fine. He was wrong, had to be.

Like May said, the Lord watches over His, even when mistakes are made. She was right. Then could it be He sent Eversole?

The man not responding to CeCe's kiss brought to mind Lisbeth Akins ambushing him when she was fourteen. Except, thankfully, he never had any feelings for the girl, while Elijah appeared to be coming up with new equipment to forge.

A planter would buy him another month. Henry smiled. The young man could probably stretch it into six weeks or more.

"Mister Henry, sir?"

He turned around. His son-in-law's junior partner stood just inside the door. Hat in hand. "Morning, Son. Should I shake your hand or blow you head off?"

Chapter Nine



Elijah stepped closer. At least Cecelia's father wasn't holding a gun on him. The scent of fresh-cut hay filling the barn couldn't overpower the taste of fear though. He swallowed and extended his hand.

"I'd understand if you did, sir, but then you wouldn't..."

The older man shook his head. "Forget the engine and planter. My daughter is not for sale."

"No, oh, that's not what I was saying." He dropped his hat and held his hands up. "Not at all. I was going to say you'd lose a son-in-law."

The older man eyed him hard, but Elijah didn't look away. He finally went back to brushing The Black, although it seemed with a bit too much gusto. "So, tell me your version of night before last."

He scooped up his hat and eased closer, filled his lungs, then tried again to swallow away the acidic dryness.

"I was working on the drawing in my room and heard something in the attic. At first I thought squirrels. Then, oh, Lord, was I surprised when Cecelia opened the water closet door."

"You never said a word to her about coming to your room?"

"No, sir. I'd never...but...in the end, I'm glad that she did, sir."

"How so?"

"After Caleb Wheeler died, I proposed to Mary Rachel."

The older man's face turned to flint, but he said nothing.

"She refused me, of course. Too soon, I guess. But it broke my heart when she took up with Clinton."

"Who?"

"Edward Clinton, her second baby's father, sir. Turned out he was married."

"So what's that got to do with Cecelia coming to your room?"

"I'm going to admit straight up. I thought building you a steam engine would be a good excuse to meet Mary's sisters. See if any of them were cut from the same cloth, as pretty and smart, and God-fearing." For a heartbeat, he tried to picture his first love in his mind's eye, but Cecelia's image alone filled his soul.

"Son, you keep stopping. Get to it."

"Not until the other night—when she showed up—did I know for sure. I'm in love with Cecelia, sir. Those feelings I had for Mary don't

even compare to those in my heart right now toward her sister.”

“She’s too young.”

“Well, I respectfully disagree, sir, but certainly understand your absolute right to say so. I’ll wait though. However long it takes. I’m asking for your blessing to court Cecelia, sir, and when—only when—we earn your blessing, to make her my wife.”



Of their own, the muscles in Henry’s shoulders relaxed. His fists unclenched. “That’s good to hear. Why didn’t you kiss my daughter back when she visited?”

“Oh, I wanted to. So much it hurt. But the Lord strengthened me, just as He has every time I hear the siren’s song.”

Henry resisted smiling. Praise God for a kindred spirit. “How long did she stay in your room?”

“Seemed like only seconds, could have been two or three minutes. No more.”

“You’re sure.”

“Couldn’t have been longer. She only told me she was worth waiting for and...well...there was the kiss, but it was short and sweet. That’s all. I wanted her to stay for certain. I wanted to smother her in kisses. But the one, along with her declaration...it told me all I needed to know, sir. I’m in love, I want to spend the rest of my life making your daughter happy.”

For sure, the young man was saying all the right things. “We only work till noon today, so we can get ready for church tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. The cousins were telling me that yesterday.”

“Have any problem with the Methodist?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Dinner at one sharp.” He extended his hand. Elijah jumped to take it and shook vigorously. Henry pulled him in close. “Son, no matter how much I like you or my daughter thinks she loves you, I’ll kill you dead and feed you to the hogs if you hurt my baby.”

“Understood, sir, but no worries. I’d never harm her in any way, and swear to you now, I’d give my life to save hers, sir.”

Henry released his grip and smiled. “Good to hear. You get anything to eat? We don’t have a big breakfast on Saturdays.”

“Oh, yes, sir. Miss Jewel took care of me.”

“Excellent, now go on and git. We both have a lot to do.”

Once back inside, he found his wife sipping coffee, eating sugar cookies, and visiting with Chester and Miss Jewel. He liked Mammy’s new name, though still had to remind himself at times. He stopped in

the door, leaned against the jam, and drank in May's beauty.

Mercy, Lord, could You have made a more gorgeous woman?

Susannah had been famous for her looks, but Millicent May Merriweather Buckmeyer was an even more handsome female. The love in his heart spread to his mouth.

She looked up. "What are you grinning about?"

"You, sweetheart. I love you so much."

She stood, and he walked into her extended arms. "I love you, too, Husband." She kissed him lightly then hugged him tight. Before he was ready, she leaned back. "We're having coffee and sweets for breakfast."

He winked at Miss Jewel. "Any cornbread left from last night?"

She jumped to her feet. "Yes, sir. Wants a hunk with honey?"

"Any ham we could slide inside?"

The older woman grinned as she poured him a cup of coffee. "How's about I fry you up a set of eggs to go with that?"

He took her offering then sat next to his wife. "No, thank you. Cornbread slathered in honey and a nice slab of ham will do me up right." He took a sip then faced his wife. "Had a nice talk with Elijah just now."

"What did he allow?"

"Told pretty much the same story as Cecelia. You ever hear of an Edward Clinton?"

"Doesn't ring any bells." She looked to her brother. "What about you, Chester?"

He nodded. "Maybe. I believe Governor Clinton might've had a son named Edward."

"Erie Canal, Governor Clinton?"

"Yes, sir, but before it got finished, we all called it Clinton's ditch."



May wanted to hear more about his and Elijah's conversation, but knew the man well enough not to press him with anyone else within earshot. And the change in him when he mentioned Clinton was slight, but perceptible.

Lots to talk about. And one more day of proof that another wee Buckmeyer should be expected.

If her monthlies didn't come soon, she'd have no choice but to tell him.

Miss Jewel set his breakfast in front of him, and May amused herself watching the man scarf down his meal. How was it he never

gained any weight eating the way he did?

Once finished, he drank another cup of coffee then stood and extended his hand. "How's your story coming?"

She let him pull her to her feet then grinned. "Fine, now that The Red Rooster lost his tail feather."

"So, I'm your pirate after all?"

"Maybe." She snuggled in and walked lockstep with him to the library's door where he stepped aside and let her go first. She loved him so, such a gentleman. An errant chuckle jumped past her lips.

"What's funny?"

She twirled, grabbed both of his hands, then tugged. "You! I was just thinking how much I appreciate you being such a gentleman. As I did, that wolf you harbor hit me, and it tickled." She kissed him. "You are such a contrast. Genteel one second, the next charging a drunk with a loaded gun aimed at your nose."

He kissed her back. "Am I ever going to live that down?"

"No, sir. Your bravery warms my heart. You're like a heated blanket on a cold night, my knight in shining armor, my –"

He kissed her silent. She loved it, him not wanting to bask in her praise. He leaned back and stared deep into her eyes. "So, when are you planning on telling me?"

How could he know? Couldn't, he had to be talking about something different. She searched his eyes, hoping her own weren't giving her away. "Tell you what?"

He inhaled then his lips thinned. "How late are you?"

A dozen cotton bolls suddenly filled her mouth and throat. He did! He knew! She forced a spitless swallow and lay her head on his chest. "Have I ever told you how perceptive you are?"

"A time or two. Answer my question."

"Two months, nine weeks maybe, but Miss Jewel says nursing mothers' cycle can get messed up. She said most times, you can't get pregnant while you're still nursing." She gently pushed herself slightly away. "How'd you know?"

"Crockett bunking with Gwendolyn two nights in a row. And my love, of late you've not snapped or growled or offered to slit my throat one time."

Her lips turned down. She barred her teeth and growled then laughed. "Why, I never! When have I ever threatened to do you bodily harm?"

"With your eyes, sweet May. You've killed me at least a dozen times hurling daggers."

What could she say? He knew her so well. "It certainly wasn't on purpose, but I do truly want a daughter. I'm so blessed to have your girls, and I think they're coming closer and closer to thinking of me as

their mother, but I may never be completely me until I have a baby girl. Is that fine with you?"

"As long as I have you."

She backed up a step and stuck out her hand. "Deal, and then we're done."

He took her hand but instead of shaking, drew her in and pressed his lips against hers. "Crockett's going to hate you."

"No, he will not. Don't you even say that!"

"Only for a while. Until he forgets how much he likes his nummies."

"How would he, seeing the new baby getting them?"

"All the better to wean him now. Give him time to forget. Don't you need to give everything you can to the new baby—all the nutrients and everything?"

Smiling, she exaggerated her nodding, then pushed him toward the wingback. "I'll talk to Miss Jewel about all that, but I've been dying to get you alone. I want to hear about Edward Clinton, every word of what Elijah said, and, how you're going to handle everything."



While the master and mistress of the house talked, right at that minute another confab unfolded in the parlor that would one day bring heartache to all of the extended family.

"Let me see it."

Lacy Rose grabbed her paper and held her it to her chest.

"Promise me you will not tell."

Bart grinned. "Why? What'd you draw? Let me see."

"Not until you promise."

He looked around then leaned close. "You're my best friend. I ain't never telling on you ever."

Best friends. Her heart swelled then fell just as quickly. "So you promise?"

"Yes, I promise. You have my word."

"Good."

"What about Houston?"

His shoulders rose then fell. "Me and him are buds, but you and I are...." His grin turned down.

He might not want to say it, but she knew exactly what hung on the tip of his tongue. The words he couldn't spit out. She held out her picture of the people's village or at least what she imagined it looked like from her mother's stories.

“One day, I’m going to find my Comanche family. Want to come with me?”

The almost nine-year-old stared long at her. “How long will it take?”

“I don’t know. We could ride on the train. A week maybe?”

“What about Houston? Tan he tome? Are you inviting him?”

“No. He isn’t half Indian like us, and you cannot tell him either. You promised. Remember?”

“I won’t. Mama and Partner wouldn’t like it if I was to light out.”

“Well, you can study on it, but I’m going whether you go or not.”

“When?”

“Maybe in three years, we’ll be almost twelve then. Look at Charley. He’s twelve and more man than boy.”

“He’s thirteen.”

“Oh. Well. That really doesn’t matter anyway.” Only the promise she made to herself mattered. And that no one found out. One day, she’d go find her father’s people.

Comanche didn’t have a word for half-breed.

Chapter Ten



The instant Cecelia laid eyes on her father that last day of the week, she knew he knew and it about broke her heart. How could May? Why had she ever called her Mama or trusted her? A real mother would never have told him!

The only thing that helped soothe her shame was that he hadn't immediately locked her in her room until she turned eighteen.

Perhaps Mama May could be credited with that small blessing. Should she ask her? Maybe...if she would tell Cecelia about the conversation...at least she'd know better what to say to Daddy when he confronted her.

Where was her stepmother anyway? Sooner or later, the hammer was sure to fall. The only question was when.

The rest of that day, she did all she could to avoid him and his wrath that had to be simmering, getting ready to boil any minute. Being locked in her room might have been better than dealing with all the fear and dread plaguing her.

And she never was able to catch May alone either, like the woman purposely avoided her.

Sunday proved no better.

Perhaps he was waiting until he shipped Elijah back to California before lowering the boom on her. Normally, church was the highlight of her week, but she could not enjoy any of it.

Even Levi and Rose spending the whole day with them failed to lighten her heart. She wanted to find a hole and crawl in and hide until her eighteenth birthday.

Except even then, that would only mean she could be courted. What good would that be if Daddy sent Elijah packing?

He loved her, said he'd wait—well, almost—and even came up with a planter to build so he could stay another month. Since that night though, he'd only given her a glance and a quick smile. At least it reassured her some.

Oh, why had she done it? Now everything was just...wrong! She should've trusted God.

By Sunday night, she had to unburden her heart. She tapped on Gwen's door then stuck her head inside. Her big sister raised up off her bed, glanced at the baby-boy-sized lump and quickly crossed her

lips with a finger.

Cecelia slipped in and eased the door closed. What was Crockett doing in her bed...again? Gwen tucked the covers in tight then joined Cecelia in the far corner. She turned the oil lamp up a bit then eased her needlework into her lap.

“What’s got you so upset?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“No, all Bonnie and I have been able to figure out is that you’re in big trouble. What did you do? And why haven’t you come talk to me before now?”

She swallowed. Coming was a mistake, but since there, might as well tell Gwendolyn of her sin. Since confession was supposed to be so good for the soul and all. A sigh escaped and she glanced away from her sister’s penetrating gaze. “Three nights back, I snuck into Elijah’s room through the attic.”

“You didn’t!”

“Oh, yes, I did alright.”

“No, CeCe! Why would you do such a thing?”

“I thought I had to, but it was nothing but a huge mistake. Especially since Daddy knows.”

“Are you sure? If he did, he’d have done something by now. Don’t you think?”

“He knows, believe me, though he hasn’t said a word about it. I don’t know why he hasn’t lowered the boom. There’s disappointment all over his face every time he’s looked at me.” She covered her eyes with both hands then pushed her hair away from her face. “And he must have said something to Elijah, too, because the man hasn’t said a word and only glanced my direction one time since Saturday morning.”

“I thought it strange when he made a point of riding in another wagon going to church.” Gwen shook her head, picked up her needle, then set it back down. “And I thought I had problems. Choosing between Clay and Braxton is nothing compared to...” She leaned in close. “What exactly happened after you got there?”

“Nothing, well...” She couldn’t compound her sin by telling a lie, and it wasn’t all that bad to admit. “I told him to wait, that I was worth waiting for, then I kissed him.”

“You didn’t! Cecelia Carol, I can’t believe it. You’ve had your first kiss before me! It isn’t fair.” Her eyes widened. “What’d he do?”

“Nothing, didn’t put a hand on me or even kiss me back in the slightest.”

“Oh, thank God for that. So it really doesn’t even count.”

Pursing her lips, she shook her head at her older sister. “Really, Gwen, is that all you can think about? Who got the first kiss? It hurt

my heart a bit that night, but you're right. I bless God, and am so thankful Elijah responded as he did. He'd surely have been sent packing...and might even been dead if he hadn't."

"So, not even a little bit? Did he hug you?"

"No! I already said he didn't lay a hand on me. He just stood there."

"How'd Daddy find out?"

"Uncle Chester heard me in the attic and told May. Why's Crockett up here anyway?"

"Mama and Miss Jewel think it's time to wean him."

"Oh." Cecelia leaned back, remembering overhearing them arguing over that. Daddy obviously won the debate. Didn't he always?

"Forget our baby brother. Tell me more about this late night escapade of yours."

"There's not much else to it."

"Sure there is. I want to hear every word between you and Mama May. I noticed you called her by her first name only. I sure wouldn't get into that habit."

"I asked her not to tell Daddy, and it had to be the first thing she did as soon as she got him alone!"

"Cecelia, you can't hold that against her. She had to."

"She did not."

For the next two hours, she relived the night for her sister, every detail, and the conversation with Mama May. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed re-experiencing the kiss as she had ten thousand times in the last two days.

And loved the conflict on her sister's face when she opened them again.

For a fact, Gwendolyn had never been kissed by anyone but family, and that only on the cheek for the last ten years.

After the telling and retelling and answering every question, the conversation drifted to the why as to her father doing nothing and wondering on all the possibilities.

Of the many considerations discussed, none matched the reality of the following morning.



Each time May laid eyes on Cecelia, she wanted to hug the girl and tell her it would all work out. But Henry hadn't made up his mind yet as to exactly what he was going to do, and until he did....

So, she avoided the young lady. CeCe probably thought she'd lied to her. But she'd only said she leaned toward keeping the secret.

In the end, she had not been able.

The trust she enjoyed with her husband proved too valuable—even to being called Mama. She had one of her own now with another on the way.

Since that cat got discovered peeking out of its bag, she was all the more convinced of her condition, and this one would be a baby girl. She just knew it. In the end, even if she wanted to, she could not keep a secret from Henry.

Then to her and the young lovers' surprise, after breakfast, instead of work, Henry invited Elijah to his library. Then with a whisper and wink, asked her to fetch Cecelia and join him.

"What does he want? Is he going to send Elijah home?"

If only she had an inkling. "I truly have no clue, sweetheart. When I asked this morning, he said he still hadn't made up his mind."

From the parlor through the hall, the girl walked next to her, then stopped ten feet short of the destination. "Why did you tell him?"

"Darling, it was too important not to. And he would have found out sooner or later, and then it would have been worse for both of us."

The seventeen-year-old filled her lungs, pressed her lips together, then took another step. "What if he says no? What if Elijah goes back to California?"

May slipped her hand under Cecelia's arm and tugged. "Come on, baby, we shouldn't borrow trouble. Let's wait and see what he has to say."

The young lady closed her eyes and nodded. "You're right." She stiffened her spine, held her shoulders back, tilted her chin slightly, and proceeded to the door, exactly like a Buckmeyer should.

Oh, Lord, smooth out her path. Soften her father's heart.



Cecelia tapped the door then held it, once bidden to enter, until Mama May stepped inside.

Her father sat behind his desk while Elijah rested rather comfortable-looking in the far wingback. Was that a good sign? Or had her daddy given him the out he really wanted all along?

After all, truth be known, he'd only nodded. Never said the words 'I'll wait.' Was that what this was all about? Her hearing it first hand, just like when he sent Clay packing?

Elijah jumped up and offered his chair to Mama May.

"No thank you, dear." She waved him back down, strolled around the desk, and eased into the extra chair.

"Sit down, baby." Her father gestured toward the other wingback.

“Yes, sir.” Obedience being the wise path, she minded as she always had when her father told her to do anything. Didn’t all those years of instant obedience count for anything? She was a good daughter and deserved his trust and leniency.

Why couldn’t the high and mighty Patrick Henry Buckmeyer give her the benefit of the doubt?

Probably because she’d snuck through the attic into a man’s room in the middle of the night. She was doomed, and it was all her fault. She made herself offer him a smile then glanced at the object of her great affections who seemed way too relaxed.

Daddy glanced at his bride who sat next to him on his right. Exactly as Gwen described when he banished Clay. Her new mama sitting there not saying a word, while the king told everyone exactly how things were going to be.

A body would think a famous novelist like May Merriweather would have an opinion.

He turned on her. “Sweetheart, when I heard about what you did, my first reaction was to shoot Elijah and lock you in your room until you’re twenty.” He grinned and nodded toward May. “But your mother convinced me otherwise.”

Cecelia scooted forward a bit in her chair, glanced at Elijah, gave Mama May a quick smile before facing her father again. “I was wrong, Daddy. I know that. I thought I had to, but now I know I was dead wrong, and I’m sorry. If you could please –”

He held a hand up. “Repentance is good, but other than you kissing him, nothing happened.”

“That’s right. Yes, sir. Absolutely nothing. But I was still wrong to –”

That time he silenced her with a look.

“As I was saying, you realizing your infraction, admitting you were wrong is good, but even more than you being wrong, Mister Eversole’s actions being right have weighed heavily on my decision.” He nodded at Elijah, then turned his attention back to her.

“Oh, yes, Daddy. It was all my fault. Elijah didn’t do anything, truly.”

“Once all the facts were known, and no one needed killing, I prayed a lot about what I should do.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. Her breath caught. Her heart pounded. Could they all hear it? Now it came. The punishment. At least he didn’t blame the sweetest, best, wisest man she’d ever known.

What was he doing? Why didn’t he say something?

She wanted to scream. The least he could do was spit it out. But instead, she folded her hands in her lap and waited like the good daughter she was. The torture of waiting could all be a part of his

plan, her punishment.

A glance at May only went to prove the woman never flinched. She looked to be praying. Her eyes were closed.

Please, Lord.

Why hadn't CeCe thought of that herself, sooner?

Please let him be merciful toward me and Elijah.

Daddy nodded as though whatever edict about to be rendered had been confirmed by the Almighty.

Oh, Lord, don't let him send my love away.

"I have decided Elijah's good actions outweigh your bad behavior."

Good, praise the Lord. She breathed again. But what exactly was he saying? She filled her lungs and scooted even further out to the edge of her seat. "What does that mean, Daddy?"

"I'm going to allow –"

She squealed, jumping to her feet. "Oh, yes! Thank you, Daddy!" She cleared the corner of the desk and threw her arms around his neck. "When can we get married?"

He took an arm in each hand and unwound her then held her hands and stared into her eyes, shaking his head. "Whoa, baby girl. Sit back down, and let me finish."

Her feet wanted to dance. He was wonderful! She had the best father in the whole world! She forced her feet to return to the chair, giving Elijah the biggest smile she could when her back was to her father, but what was that on his face?

"Do you love him?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I do, Daddy! With my whole heart. It was just like when you saw my mother that first time at the Trading Post. I've loved him from then to now and will forever."

He smiled. "He's telling me the same thing...."

Elijah loved her? He loved her! He'd told her daddy he loved her! Her heart swelled so that it choked her and pushed tears out to flood her eyes.

How could it be? She could hardly stand being so happy. She'd never been that full of pure joy in her life! Her father's voice brought her back to earth. What was he saying?

"...be practical about this."

"Practical? Why?" She looked at Elijah who grinned like a Cheshire cat, but her tears blurred the details of his face. She wanted to know every detail. She looked back to Daddy. "We love each other."

He held his hand up. "The poet tells us that absence makes the heart grow fonder."

No! She hated the sound of that! Was he sending her love away

after all?

“But –”

“Elijah has to be back in San Francisco by the first of October.”

She looked to her love, who confirmed the statement with a shrug and a nod. She turned to her father. “What are you saying?”

“He can court you until he has to leave, that’s four months. Then upon his return, we will set a date any time after your birthday.”

She scooted back and pressed into the chair. She hated it, but she could wait. That Elijah professed his love meant everything to her. She would be the happiest woman in the world and have the best life anyone possibly could.

Her love for Elijah Eversole was true, and she loved her father, too. He was the best...well, after Elijah.

Mama was smiling, too.

“Thank you, Daddy.”



Bonnie pushed herself off the floor and threw the listening glass against Cecelia’s water closet’s wall. It shattered into a thousand pieces, but she didn’t care. She hated him! And CeCe!

Tears filled her eyes.

Bonnie Claire sank to her knees and wept.

Chapter Eleven



Gwen hefted the baby higher on her hip and opened the water closet door. Bonnie, who sat on the floor amidst a thousand shards of crystal, raised her head and stared at her with bloodshot eyes, her cheeks wet with tears.

“Are you bleeding? Do I need to get Daddy?”

She shook her head.

“What happened?”

“I...” She sniffed and swallowed twice. Her eyes narrowed and took on a horrible glare. “I hate them both.”

What in the world was going on here? “Bonnie! Hate both of who? Then it hit her. “Is that CeCe’s listening glass on the floor?”

She nodded. “I especially hate him. He’s such a liar.”

“Who’s lying about what?”

“Elijah! He just told them all he loved...her!” Tears flowed again, and the girl stifled a scream and hit her own head.

Crockett leaned out toward his sister. “Want Bonnieeee.”

She sniffed, wiped her runny nose on her sleeve, then held her hands out, trying her obvious best to smile at the boy. “You love Sissy, don’t you precious?”

“No, Crockett, she’s sitting in glass.” Gwen hefted him higher. “Who were you eavesdropping on?”

She flipped her hand like she was shooing a fly.

“Bonnie, I asked you a question.”

“I thought Daddy was about to send him home. But instead, he told them they could court! Daddy’s breaking his rule and letting him court Cecelia.” The corners of her mouth turned down. “It isn’t fair!”

What news. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I heard it all plain as day with my own ear! But worse, I heard Elijah say he loved Cecelia, and she said she loves him.” More tears flowed.

“Did he say anything about Clay or Braxton?”

“No.” She started to get up.

“No, no. Stay right there, and let me get a tow sack and the broom. We’ll pick up as many pieces as we can.”

“What am I going to do, Gwen? I love him, and I thought he loved me. He sure acted like it.”

“Bonnie Claire, how’d he give you that idea? Did he do something?”

“No, well, yes. He kept winking at me all the time every day. And he saved me whenever you and CeCe were being mean. You know that, had to see it with your own eyes. And I just knew he would be willing to wait for me.” She wiped her nose again. “Jacob waited seven years for Rachel. Why couldn’t he wait two and half years for me?”

“What? Your math is terrible, baby girl. You’re only twelve. Daddy would never –”

“Don’t say never because he just did!”

How could she argue with that? Hadn’t she just heard that he was allowing Cecelia to be courted ten months early? She agreed with Bonnie, it wasn’t fair.

What if she’d chosen Elijah? She should march down there right this minute and give him a piece of her mind!

“I never dreamed he’d really do it, but they’re in love.”

The way the little girl said ‘in love’ almost made her burst out laughing. Praise the Lord she caught herself and bit her tongue. Going down there wouldn’t do any good.

Once he decided on a thing...he was so....

Then again though, he let Clay come back. “Did he say anything to you about being fifteen?”

“No, but everyone can see how good a family life Judy Goldthwaite has with her Nate, and that’s the same age she was when they got married.”

“Oh, sweet Bonnie, Judy shamed herself. She was with child. That’s the only reason they got married.” The second it came out of her mouth, she regretted the words.

Dear, dear. What had she got herself into? She should never have told her sister that! What was she thinking? The girl’s expression screwed into puzzlement.

Facing her, Bonnie tilted her head. “How could that happen before they got married?”

She turned around and spied the broom leaning against the corner. She grabbed it and held it out. “Here. Start sweeping the pieces together, and I’ll get that sack and the dustpan.”

Soon as her sister took it, Gwendolyn hurried toward the opened door. “We’ll clean this mess up, then you can come to my room. It’s about morning nap time for Crockett. We can talk about Elijah and Cecelia while I rock him.”

“What if I cut myself?”

“Just be careful.”



The quill's neat compact letters always reminded Braxton of his school days with Sister Jocelynn. He glanced at his knuckles.

The scars had healed, and he did have a legible hand. Bless the old biddy's cold-blooded heart. He finished the missive, blew on the ink until sufficiently dry, then read it again.

May 17, 1853

Claude,

Tell the old man none of Buckmeyer's land is for sale, but have located several nice blocks of timber that if purchased right would bring a tidy profit. Let me know yours and our benefactor's pleasure in that matter. None of it borders Buckmeyer's vast holdings, but close enough.

Like he figured, the man is interested in running in '60, I've thought of an angle we can work there.

A new wrinkle, Henry's oldest daughter still lives at home and appears to be quite smitten with me. As much as I am with her father's wealth and the obvious inheritance. She'd definitely be a good catch. Very handsome young woman. Not sure I'd ever do better, and she might just be the highest prize anyway!

I'm staying at the Buckmeyer's, so no boarding expenses, but my cash is dwindling fast. A fresh influx would be appreciated, as there are no saloons or card parlors in this one-horse town. Return post in my name, general deliver

*As always,
Braxton*

Post Script.

To maintain my growing relations with Mister Buckmeyer, I attended a Methodist Church with the family yesterday. Nothing like the mass. I actually rather enjoyed myself, especially the singing. The homily was long, but at least I could understand what was said.

He waved it gently several more times then folded it into thirds and slipped it into the envelope he'd already labeled. That got stuffed in his inside coat pocket where it would remain until he got back to town.

Best see if Miss Jewel saved any cutbacks from breakfast. He'd hate having to spend any of his remaining coin on dinner. But he needed to post the letter. Didn't dare entrust it to Chester or anyone

else who might already be going.



Cecelia had heard the stifled scream coming from the general direction of her room, but instead of looking up, glanced at the window then turned back.

Seemed her daddy had thought it came from the children outside. His one bad ear sometimes made it difficult for him to know where a sound really came from.

“Want me to go check on them?”

“No, let’s get back to you two.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What it comes down to is can I trust you, Cecelia Carol?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. I promise, Daddy. Now that’s it settled we can get married next year, I’d never do anything out of line. You have my word.”

Elijah glanced at her then back to her father. “And mine, sir. We’ll never be alone again, I promise.”

She extended her hand, and Elijah took it. Without moving her gaze from the young man’s eyes, she said it one more time. “Thank you again, Daddy.” Finally she turned and smiled her best and biggest.

He nodded toward their outstretched hands. “That’s it. No other contact. Ever. Agreed?”

Her ‘yes sir’ followed a masculine ‘yes sir,’ and though he had started it, her words echoed almost in unison. Just like she’d be for the rest of her born days. One with her love. The two shall become one.

Dropping Elijah’s hand, she hurried to her father. Wrapping her arms around him, she squeezed him tight. “Thank you so much, Daddy.”

“Good, fine, and you’re welcome. Elijah has work to do now, and you have a chore of your own.”

“Yes, sir. Monday’s wash day. I’ll go find Gwen and Bonnie Claire.” She started toward the door, eyes glued again to Mister Eversole’s then stopped and turned. “Can I take dinner to him today?”

“No, he can take something with him.”

She pouted. “Tomorrow?”

“We’ll let tomorrow take care of itself.”

“Yes, sir.” She smiled at Elijah then beamed all around and floated out and upstairs. Gwen’s door was closed, so she eased on to her room. Nothing looked amiss. But something had happened for certain. She strolled into her water closet.

A crunch underfoot stopped her. Stepping back, she raised her shoe and extracted a piece of what looked to be cut crystal from its sole. Oh, no.

She checked, and sure enough, her listening glass had disappeared. She marched straight to Gwen's room, filling her lungs on the way to calm herself. No need to get into a fuss with her big sister.

Though Gwen had no right listening, it surely must have infuriated her that Cecelia's marriage had been blessed before hers... her being older and all.

But this day needed no arguments, being an entirely too perfect one to ruin.

She eased the door ajar. As suspected, a Crockett-sized lump lay in the middle of the bed. Her sister sat in the rocker working her needle and thread.

Cecelia held out the shard then whispered. "You know about this?"

She nodded then looked toward her water closet and mouthed. "Bonnie."



The tap backed Bonnie away from the door. Gwen must have snatched her out.

"Open it now."

She glanced to the ceiling, but retreating to the attic wasn't a possibility. The few times she'd been up there, either Charley or CeCe herself had helped her get through the hatch.

"Come on, Bonnie. Open up."

She didn't sound too mad. "You going to hurt me?"

"Of course not. Now unlock the door."

"Promise?"

"Bonnie Claire, if you don't do it now...."

Smoothing her dress, she lifted her chin then flipped the lock with every intention of marching out, but Cecelia blocked her way.

Her sister leaned in close. "Why were you in my room?"

"Because you can't hear good enough from mine. Plus your crystal is the...oh well, it was the best...."

"Exactly. Why did you break it?"

"I was mad."

"Why?"

How could she ever tell her? She shook her head. Cecelia didn't need to know anything. "What difference does it make? I'm not mad

anymore, and I'm sorry."

CeCe glanced at Gwen who just smiled then turned back. "That glass cost me two dollars and sixty-five cents."

"Fine. I'll go get your money."

"No, ma'am. You're working it off. Ten cents a day. I'm getting married, and between now and then, I'm going to need me a chaperone."

Oh well, even though she didn't like it, that sounded better than having to give up over half her coin horde. She hated not having money when she did get to go to town of a Saturday.

"Fine, but I heard Pa talking to Miss Laura about starting school back up once planting is over, and that's going to be pretty soon."

"Not a problem. Elijah and I will help you with your lessons."

Bonnie looked past CeCe to Gwen who smiled, raised her brows, and nodded. "I'll do it, but I want fifteen cents a day credit."

"How about we ask Daddy? Let him decide."

Oooo, she hated being the youngest sister and them always getting the best of her. She pursed her lips. "No. Nevermind. A dime will be fine." She smiled real big.

A lot can happen between now and next March.

Chapter Twelve



The trip to Clarksville produced two boons for Braxton.

When posting his letter at the stage office located inside the Donoho's lobby, he overheard an interesting conversation about a nice block of timberland north of town only about seven miles.

That gave him a reason to be out and about, but the second bit of news warmed his heart. Seemed there was an out of the way saloon in these parts after all. And darkening the door of the Methodist meeting hall is exactly what got him an invite.

That afternoon, he spent a rather pleasant time playing poker with gents who seemed to love giving him their coin. As was his custom first time at a game, he gave back almost all of it, right before he figured he needed to leave to make supper.

Wouldn't do to get marked as a sharp before time.

As calculated, he stuck his boots under Henry's table with a quarter hour to spare. Shortly, the beauties began bringing in the feast. Heaven forbid, he'd marry either of them just for grazing rights.

But first, he needed to get past Buckmeyer, and according to Clay Briggs, that proved no easy chore. He'd already sent the boy home once.

Ten, twelve bites into the meal, Henry set his fork on the side of plate, as though the man had real manners. "How'd your day go, Braxton?"

"Good, sir. Got a lead on a nice block of timber north of town. The Loveless place. You know of it?"

"Yes, I do, but unless Pete has passed and I didn't hear of it, you'll not get that block for market. That old man only trades if he gets the best end plus ten percent."

"Don't know for sure who's offering it, better than a headright, though, if the rumor holds."

"True, and Pete hasn't cleared more than a few hundred acres last I heard."

The creamed potatoes came round, and Braxton scooped three spoonfuls on his plate before passing them. "You interested in taking a look?"

"No, not me. Might be a fool's errand."

"Possible, but in my business, can't leave any stones unturned."

This was perfect, give him another opportunity to liberate more coin from that game.

“Understandable.” The man turned his attention to the far end of the dining table. “Chester, tell Braxton what you read in that newspaper you picked up for us today.”

The ex-slave launched into a diatribe on politics, then offered a new piece of news.



Gwen didn't care one whit for politics, but she did appreciate the distraction that afforded her the opportunity to see how Clay reacted to her studying on the stranger in their midst. His return had thrilled her heart.

Coming all the way back to beg Henry Buckmeyer for another chance took guts. Then even better that Daddy let him stay.

No doubt Clay's mama was plenty upset with him just getting home then lighting right back out again. Seeing how he was her baby. Gwen would hate being the youngest. Poor Bonnie.

How did Mis'ess Briggs feel about her boy wanting to wed? He obviously loved his mother, talked about her a lot, and didn't seem to mind her doting on him something awful at church.

Surely she approved the match. Who might she possibly think was better suited?

Braxton, on the other hand, hadn't said anything about his family, well not to her anyway. Strange now that she thought of it. Clay stared at the timber man. She grinned. Was that flash of hate her beau was shooting at Mister Hightower?

Oh, she loved it!

Though the whole situation with her younger sister and Elijah was rather off-putting, there had not really been any true interest in Mister Eversole on her part. She had enjoyed the competition between the three men being centered on her.

If one was going to drop out, though, she was glad it wasn't Braxton Hightower...or Clay Briggs.

Still, it wouldn't be right for CeCe to get married before her.

The Californian, if what she'd heard from Mary Rachael held true, was well off in his own right. Her older sister told her in the strictest of confidences that their gold mine made over a thousand dollars a month.

Every month, even while Elijah worked on Daddy's steam engine there in Texas.

Though Clay's family seemed financially fine, she suspected old

man Briggs wouldn't be tossing much of it his son's way, not with seven older siblings. She had a right smart nest egg herself, but... would she ever touch that money?

For sure she'd not make the same mistake as Mary Rachel.

None of her suitors would have an inkling about the gold coins her daddy had put back for her and her brothers and sisters.

"Oh, yes, sir. I believe you might be right about a war coming, but if one puts any stock in what Mister Greely claims, it can be avoided."

Giving her a quick glance as though to be certain she paid attention, Clay pointed his fork at Braxton. "Texas should never have joined the Union."

Hightower snickered. "With Santa Ana breathing down you Texans' necks, itching for another fight...if you hadn't joined the Union, then...."

For the next bit, the young men debated. Well, Elijah stayed out of it, but when their tone heated, her daddy stood. "Gentlemen."

One word—one not even that loud—and both men fell silent.

"Perhaps we should refrain from politics until after supper."

"Yes, sir." Clay spoke first, then looked at her. He knew how she disdained the topic.

Braxton only nodded, then he, too, looked her way. "Gwendolyn, how was your day?"

She enjoyed the way he smiled, except she wanted more time to study on the men. "Excellent, sir, and yours?"

His smile increased. "Had a wonderful day, thank you very much. Tomorrow I'll go investigate that timberland I told your father about."

She feigned interest and encouraged him to tell her more, loving Clay's hangdog expression. He was so smitten with her, no doubt about that. But was he the one she'd choose? Before Elijah and Braxton came along, she thought he was her best option, but now....

"Only about five miles north from Wellington's if I've got it right." He looked at her daddy. "Is that correct, sir?"



For a bit, Henry only stared then nodded. "About that, no more than seven. Easy ride there and back."

"Good. Figure I'll leave out first thing in the morning."

Again Henry nodded then turned his attention to Clay. "Your mama didn't seem too happy yesterday after church."

"No, sir, but unless I'm hanging onto her apron strings, she's that way. Doesn't dote on any of the others like she does me." He grinned.

“Spect we’ll have to alternate Sunday dinners....” His faced turned red. “Uh...well...I mean if....”

“Some mothers have trouble letting go.” He’d heard that about Maud Briggs, but until this minute had passed it off as an old wife flapping her gums.

A glance Gwendolyn’s way proved she’d heard him, too, smiling like a woman with someone wrapped around her little finger and tied in a bow.

“Elijah tells me you’re a big help.”

“Try to be, sir.”

Henry eyed Eversole. “You tell Clay what we decided?”

The Californian set his fork down, glanced at Clay then back. “Yes, sir, sure did. We’ve already moved his bedroll from the bunkhouse.”

Gwen’s puzzlement amused him, but she didn’t need to know everything he did. The young man obviously saw it, too, as he sent her a quick grin. “Excellent, let me know if we need to make any changes.”

“Yes, sir, but I don’t anticipate any. Early on, I bunked with two other miners in closer quarters.”

“That the claim you and Jethro are partners on?” Henry leaned back, hoping the young man would take the conversation to the gold fields. At first, he only hinted at his past, but then with each question asked and answered, it brought out more.

Houston—always first to finish eating and usually itching to get the table cleared and dishes done—hung on every word out of Elijah’s mouth. The gold miner himself stood first and started stacking plates and bowls.

With both hands full, he turned toward the kitchen.

Seemed to Henry that Braxton walked slower through the chore each meal he ate, but had to give him staying until the end, unlike his own little man-plant. More times than not, Houston slipped out, disappearing before the last dish was dried and put away.

From the kitchen, he joined his wife and the young folks in the parlor, but everyone kept their good distance.

His Bonnie Claire watched them with her hawk eyes, so he figured that he could retire to his quarters. He bade them a good night and left. Later than he would have preferred, May joined him.

As she swept into the room, he looked up from his ledger. He loved the way she moved. Almost like floating, but with a joy in her step. That wouldn’t be lasting through the next half year though. “Want to sit here?”

“Why, please, kind sir, and thank you.” She grinned. “That chair of yours fits me perfectly, and the wingbacks seem to pain my back

worse.”

He resisted mentioning what she'd gotten herself into. He loved his babies, every one, but still would have liked it best if Crockett had satisfied her need to mother. Miss Jewel had gone out of her way to tell him May would be fine though.

He eased into the right hand wingback. Truth be known, he preferred sitting there instead of his chair.

Once she settled in, he gave voice to what he'd been thinking since the man gave himself away. “We need to have a word with Gwendolyn.”

“About?”

“You ever heard of Wellington's?”

“No, I can't recall. Do they go to church? I thought I'd met about everyone.”

“No, not a family. There's only one of them, and he runs the only saloon or card parlor in the county.”

A bit of interest flashed in her pretty eyes then turned to concern. “Oh? Where is it?”

“North of town four or five miles. Can't find it if you don't know what you're looking for and have decent directions.”

“So...you figure Mister Hightower has been there?”

“Looks that way to me.”

Her shoulders hiked a bit. “Oh, darling, is it so bad? I've been known to make a wager or two, you know.”

“So have I, but I been thinking. Figured after the way Gwendolyn was making eyes at the both of them, I could save us all a lot grief and shoot them both.”

She snickered then shook her head. “Henry Buckmeyer, what about Elijah?”

“He's going home to California in a couple of months. If Eversole does come back, I could shoot him then.”

“Sweetheart, you cannot keep these girls your babies forever.”

Even though she was right, he hated it that they'd grown up so fast. “Still, we need to warn Gwendolyn about Hightower. You got any inkling who she might be leaning toward?”

“No, I believe we need to stay out of it right now. She'll make the right choice when the times comes.” She tilted her pretty head and smiled that smile he loved more than life.

He started to bring up Mary Rachel and her bad decisions, but his second-born daughter wasn't her older sister. Rebecca had downright spoiled him, waiting so long to get married.

Why his daughters seemed in such a rush perplexed him. Wasn't like he had them out working in the fields every day. They had no idea how hard life could get.

Their mother learned the hard way.

Was that it? Had he spoiled them? Made life too easy for them. Sheltered them too much...that's what he'd done. Even Bonnie Claire. Twelve years old and campaigning for him to change his courting rules. What was the world coming to?

No doubt shooting all the suitors sure would make his life easier. If only it were legal. "Is Crockett with Gwen tonight?"

"Last I saw, Houston and Bart had him outside holding the jar of fireflies. They're catching and he's the keeper. But she said she'd take him up when she goes."

He stood. He certainly liked the new sleeping arrangements. "You ready for bed?"

"In a minute. Sit back down, please, sir. I wrote three pages on the pirate story I need you to read."

He did as told, she asked so nice and all. If only someone would be as plain telling him what he needed to do with his baby girls.

Chapter Thirteen



As the month of May melted into June, Clay knew for certain three things. He loved Gwendolyn more than he thought possible.

Whenever he laid eyes on her with the baby, it swelled his heart. She'd make him one fine wife and his babies an exceptional mother.

Pleased him to no end that Elijah and Cecelia were settled, put even more pressure on his love's father to give him the go ahead on courting his lady love. Wouldn't be right, the younger sister marrying first.

Some old wives' tales even claimed that would destine Gwendolyn to be a spinster, not that Clay would ever let that happen.

Second, he liked Eversole better than any of his own brothers. The man treated him like a peer instead of the snot-nosed tagalong he'd been most of his life. He'd always hated being the baby.

To top the biscuit with a good lathering of cane molasses, Elijah had offered him ten percent of his planter out of his own cut.

Once the patent came back, and Elijah and Mister Henry went into production, that might mean better than a hundred dollars a year, and all he did was speak his mind about making a few changes here and there, knowing more about farming.

That Elijah Eversole was top shelf. In every way.

He'd learned so much helping the man build the steam engine and his first planter. Almost made him want to forget ranching and be a smith, except Elijah called himself a machinist. He'd sure hate to see him go when the time came.

And his third certainty? First chance he got, he was going to plug the scoundrel, Braxton Hightower. That Gwen could even possibly be interested in the pompous dandy hurt his heart. It remained the only black mark against her.

Smart as she was, he could not understand how she didn't see at first glance.

His new friend claimed she only toyed with the man to make Clay jealous and to let her daddy know she didn't fall for the first handsome fella to stall his horse in the Buckmeyer's barn.

Another reason he chalked up as to why he liked the gold mining machinist so much. The man talked good sense.

And Clay hoped that was truth, but every time he got a private word with Gwen, she would only say. "You know you have to get my

father's blessing. Do that, and then we'll talk."

With the planting finished and the children back to their books, those quiet moments spent almost alone with his love proved harder to come by.

The ladies only brought dinner to the mill once or twice a week, instead of every day. At least he found delight that seeking timberland kept Hightower away more and more.

Then, to his surprise, his oldest brother's horse chomped hay in a stall in the Buckmeyer's barn that mid-June evening. Halfway through unharnessing Elijah's gelding, Jake busted through the man door.

"There you are, Clay. Ma says to get yourself home. Tonight."

"What's the rush?"

"You ain't heard about the yellow fever outbreak?"

"No. What about it?"

"Killed over seven thousand in New Orleans, and Ma wants all her chickens close, especially her precious sweet little baby chick." He hated his brother's nasty falsetto, hadn't missed that.

At twenty-five, Clay figured he could best Jake who was pushing forty. But then what? Ma would just send another brother to fetch him home.

At least the old boy wasn't twisting his ear and kicking his backside as he ran toward the house. Wouldn't do him any good to argue. Much as he hated leaving, he'd just have to make the best of it.

"Give me a few minutes to take my leave."

"Go on then. Where's your saddle, and I'll wrangle for you like when you was three."

Clay told him and didn't miss the smirk Elijah tried to keep from erupting into a full-blown haw.



The news the boy's brother brought about yellow fever breaking out in Braxton's home town explained why Raines hadn't responded to his missive. After only a few minutes of reflection, without his partner's help or Bull's coin, he had no reason to stay—other than Gwen, and she had rebuffed most of his advances.

Once he had horse ready and tied to the main hitching post in front of the big house, he found Henry in his library huddled with May and her brother.

"Hate to bother you, sir, but the fever hitting New Orleans explains why I've not heard from my partner there. As much as I hate leaving before I could finalize any timber purchases, I must get back and see to my friend's well-being. Sometimes Claude's good works

takes him places he shouldn't go."

How many times had he warned his partner about the brothels and back alley dice games he frequented?

He let his lie sink in.

Hopefully, he'd put enough sincerity in his voice. Perhaps he should have practiced that line in front of the mirror before he delivered it. Oh well, most likely he'd never see Buckmeyer again.

Henry stood and extended his hand. "Send word, if you're of a mind. Let us know. And of course, you're welcome any time."

Braxton grasped the man's hand, surprised at the strength. "Thank you, sir. I'd like to write Gwen if that's permissible."

Henry nodded. "Enclose it in my envelope, and I'll pass it along."

"Of course." He smiled at Miss May, and even found a grin for the ex-slave, who only stared. Uppity came to mind, but he didn't voice it. All the hours gaming not only taught him to keep a straight face, but also to hold his tongue.



Henry walked the man out, then once the visitor topped the rise, he faced Chester who had followed. "What was that all about?"

His brother-in-law shook his head. "Didn't put it together until just now. I'd bet my cut of May's pirate novel, that Braxton's last name isn't Hightower."

Henry had grown to love the man, but sometimes, he flat out infuriated him. "Explain yourself."

He nodded toward the house. "Let's go inside. May will want to hear this."

For Henry's taste, Chester spent too many words getting to the point, but then he finally dropped the anvil. "So until just now, I didn't realize that Claude Raines is the one he wrote to. Had to be."

Not enough buck bang for Henry's ear time. "That name doesn't mean anything to me."

"Really? Every time Jean Paul tells the story of you fighting Bull, he mentions Claude Raines."

"Young guy with wavy hair?"

Chester shrugged. "Don't know about that. But that letter he posted last month only had C Raines on it. Just now though, he called his partner's name. Claude. Then it hit me. His visit all came together, the way one of May's stories winds down to its completion with all the loose ends rightfully tied."

His wife's brother went on for a bit. She seemed quite enthralled at his assumptions. Wasn't like the man talked much at all, but when

he did get going, he could gust to gale force. “Well, seems the Lord spared us all.”

Smiling at his almost child bride, Henry pondered what the man being in cahoots with Raines could encompass. A talk with Jean Paul was in order to be sure. “Guess we can forget even thinking about ‘60?”

“No. How can you say that? We cannot forget that. The country needs you. That bunch in Washington have obviously lost their collective minds. Someone that’s wise and brave and as levelheaded as you needs to go throw the whole bunch of them into the ocean.”

“True, but if Jackson couldn’t do it, what makes you think I could?”

Chester, evidently just as enamored about him running as his sister, threw in his penny’s worth. “He did pay off all the debt.”

“So? That isn’t solving the slavery issue.” How could the man not remember that?

With a chuckle, his brother-in-law stretched his back. “But if we were in charge? We could buy them all and send them north. Avoid any bloodshed fighting over it.”

Now there was an idea, but mercy, the price would go through the roof. Then again, if he was in charge, he could get Congress to.... Before that bill got passed, reality bit him. He couldn’t get himself nominated, much less elected.

Took Jackson two tries, and he was the hero who whipped the British at New Orleans.



Of all happenings, she did not expect both of her suitors to leave in one day. Gwen hated it all the way around the stump, hated it even worse when she allowed herself to even think of Cecelia Carol getting married first, before her.

Once, June had been her favorite month, but no more, not ever again would she trust it, robbing her of both her beaux.

Wasn’t right.

The next to last day of the unbearably hot month brought at least some solace. Braxton had written.

Of course, her pigheaded father’s insistence that the man put her letter in an envelope addressed to him kept it from being very personal—as if she wasn’t full grown enough to receive her own correspondence.

She hated it that Daddy read it first.

Once alone in her blistering bedroom, she sat at her desk,

smoothed it out, and studied on how the man wrote her name. Penmanship said a lot about a person. Braxton wrote with such a neat and flowing script, especially for a man.

A bead of perspiration trickled down her forehead.

Wanting to relish her letter with no distractions, she jumped up and pulled her lace curtains all the way back then tied them with a sky blue ribbon. A slight breeze cooled her skin. She unbuttoned the top buttons of her dress and let the neck lie open.

Thank the Lord, Daddy had built the house with such great ventilation to catch every breath of air the prairie offered. Sitting back at her desk, she lifted the paper. One page failed to impress her, and it not even full.

Why, she could write three or four pages without even trying, but at least it was a letter—and all she had at the moment. Clay hadn't written.

Dearest Gwendolyn,

She loved him using her full name, a Belle would have been nice, but perhaps too much. In any case, he'd started well.

I miss you and your family so much, but I have sad news. My partner and friend was one of the thousands to die from the fever. Poor man, caught it working with the Sisters of Mercy, the Order I told you about that taught both us in school.

Oh, the poor man losing his dear friend who contracted cholera trying only to help others. Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She blinked, daubed her eyes with her hanky, then managed to read on.

I long to return, but with Claude gone, I cannot fathom leaving our business interest here unattended. Perhaps once the outbreak is over, you and your family could visit.

I hate to ask, but if it would be possible for you to write, I would surely cherish every word. I pray your father will approve our correspondence. If I cannot at this time be deemed a suitor in his eyes, then perhaps you could write me as a friend. I'm feeling a bit lonely here and would appreciate it greatly.

*Always yours,
Braxton Hightower*

Post Script, I pray you will not think me forward, but if I may speak my mind, Clay Briggs is too much a boy for a fine lady like you, dear

She held the paper against her heart. Such a gentleman, and so sad about his partner and best friend. Still, honorable that he puts his responsibility ahead of his own desires. Surely it had been hard for him to leave her.

New Orleans wasn't that far away—only six days by stage and steamboat. The place her mother told her daddy she couldn't marry him.

Gwen smiled to herself. She loved the way Rebecca told that story. Perhaps, if she traveled there, she might stand on the exact spot, on Braxton Hightower's arm. That would be so romantic. The scene played out in her mind's eye, and she sighed.

Mary Rachel had been born nine months and three weeks exactly from that very day, only she and her mother, and of course her big sisters, knew that little fact. To her knowledge, CeCe and Bonnie never heard that part of the story.

Something inside prodded her to run downstairs that very moment and ask her daddy if she could go.

Humph, he'd never agree to that, not with the outbreak still a danger.

Certainly he would agree to her writing back. Would he want to read what she wrote as well? It wasn't fair him being stubborn. She chose instead to read her letter again. That would suffice, even though it hardly said anything.

Maybe she'd missed something.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to ask if she could at least write. Besides, if she did go downstairs, Crockett might see her, and this night, she didn't want a little brother in her bed.

The next morning, even before she could work the conversation around to her letter or visiting New Orleans, Elijah put both her and Cecelia into a dither.

Her sister's beau turned to Daddy. "Well, sir, the steam engine's running fine, putting out more board feet a day than anticipated, and the planter is proved, so if you're agreeable, I've decided to go back to San Francisco early."

Oh no. Why would he?

"I plan to leave tomorrow, and if he's of a mind, I hope to convince Clay to go with me." He chuckled. "That's if he can tear himself from his mother's apron strings."

Well, that was just ugly.

Chapter Fourteen



Clay had slept on it, and that morning, it sounded all the better to him than yesterday evening when Elijah invited him to go. What an awesome adventure.

Now the hard part.

How could a boy go against his ma?

He set his fork on his plate and wiped his mouth. He dropped the napkin next to the plate just as though he sat the head table in the Donoho's fancy dining room—instead of with his boots under his mama's kitchen table, same one he'd chowed down at all his life.

A boy shouldn't go against his ma, but a man would. Best he be about the telling. He and Elijah needed to get themselves to Clarksville. He stood then nodded at his father, hoping the man would take his side with her or at least keep his peace.

Would his best smile still work on her?

"Ma, I'm going to San Francisco."

"What? No you're not." She glared at his father. "Did you know about this?"

The old man hiked his off shoulder a fraction. "We talked about it last night, told him to sleep on it."

She leaned back, then held her hands out and motioned him down, but he resisted. He was done taking orders from her.

"Clayton Butterfield Briggs, sit yourself right back down. Your pa and brothers need you here, not running off to get kilt by some crazy gold digger in California." The I-dare-you-to-say-a-word look she shot his Pa kept him hushed. She turned back on Clay. "Not to mention your sisters and me. What would we do if something happened to you?"

"Now, Ma, I am not going to get myself killed."

"Don't you 'now-ma' me, Clay Briggs." She shifted inside her dress, tugging at it, then settled fresh in her chair. "'Sides, you know good and well you haven't got the money to pay a steamboat's passage. You haven't worked a full day here in forever. So don't be asking your Pa or me for any either."

The little boy part of him wanted to tell her he'd stay, but....

"I don't need any money, Ma. I'm going. Elijah said he'll take the expense out of my planter money, and he's giving me a job, too. A good one working at his mine while I'm there. We'll be back before

you know it. Elijah is marrying CeCe next year, and I've still got my eye on Gwendolyn."

"It's hard to do any sparking halfway around the world. Stay, Son. You're needed here."

"No, I'm going. Pa and the brothers do just fine without me."

"What about me, Son? I can't stand the thought of something happening to my baby. Why would you want to go and put yourself in harm's way?"

"I'm not your baby anymore, and like I said, we'll be back early next year."

Crossing her arms over her chest, she set a stare into the air, looking straight ahead. "Won't have to worry none about when you'll be back because you're not going. And that's final."

"Oh, Ma." He went to her place at the foot of the table and touched his cheek to hers. "Nothing is going to happen to me. Tell her, Pa."

His old man chuckled and shook his head, but offered no encouragement.

Taking her chin, Clay turned her face toward him. "Now Ma, I'm a man, and I'm going. Sure don't want to leave with hard feelings between us, but my bag is packed. You going to tell me goodbye or not?"

Her eyes shot fire, and he thought he was about to see her blow her top like he'd never seen before.

Then without another word spoken, tears filled her eyes and extinguished the flames. She melted into a helpless, broken woman, one to be pitied. He had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. That'd be a terrible thing.

Been a long time since he'd seen her speechless. Though already sitting, she sank more into her chair.

"Best kiss your old ma 'fore you go. Probably be the last time I'll see you in this world, but that's fine. We can be together in Heaven for all eternity. I love you, Clay."

If memory served, exactly what she told him when he stayed only an hour before the last time he left and rode back to the Buckmeyers. "You'll outlive us all, Ma."

A tear trickled down her cheek. "How can I with my baby gone to the gold fields? You'll be just like all the rest. The fever will get you, and I'll never lay eyes on you again." She sniffed and the tears flowed in earnest.

He patted her back then bent over and whispered in her ear. "I love you, Ma, and I'm coming back in the spring so I can ask Gwendolyn to marry me. I'll bring you a pretty new dress to wear to my wedding." He kissed her forehead.

“There’s no need for new dresses. Won’t be no fancy wedding.” She shook her head. “Henry never going to allow it, Clay. Then you’ll be right back out to California heartbroken, grubbing in the dirt after the mother lode.”

“Not if God still answers prayers, Ma.”

She turned on him, wiped her eyes, then shooed him away, sweeping him off with all her fingers. “Go on. Ruin your life. Break your ma’s heart—I won’t say a word about all the extra work you’re putting on me and your father and brothers.”

Clay backed up a step. “I’ll write, Ma.”

Her chin drooped all the way to her bodice. “Don’t bother, Son. I’ll be six feet under before that first letter could get here.”



Twice more Elijah’s new friend’s mother tried to get Clay to stay, then after he wouldn’t even agree to hold up long enough for the big Fourth of July shindig, she made him get down from the wagon and give her one last tearful hug.

Elijah wasn’t sure if he pitied or envied the boy-man. His own mother had left with his father seeking their fortune with hardly a look back. They did leave him the shop and all the tools pap figured he wouldn’t need, but not much else.

The fever did strange things to folks; apparently, Ma Higgs had seen it, too, or heard about it anyway. His parents talked about the Lord some but didn’t bother with church, and obviously figured him mature enough to be on his own.

Or either they let themselves get caught up in the rush and didn’t really care.

Some fine day, hopefully they’d come home.

The irony brought a chuckle.

“What’s funny?”

Elijah glanced over.

Clay glared. “You laughing at my ma?”

“No, not at all. She just loves you. Can’t fault a mother for that. I was thinking about mine.”

The boy’s face softened. “What about her?”

“She left with my pap back in ’50. The fever got them. What I always find humorous when I think about her is that I had no interest in prospecting, but the Lord brought me all the gold I’ll ever need. And a way better example of a Godly man than my father ever was.”

“You talking about Jethro Risen?”

“Yes, sir, and right up there with him, I’d name Henry

Buckmeyer.”

“You know he’s killed ten men.”

“Heard that, but according to Mary Rachel, not a one of them who didn’t need killing.”

“Maybe so, but the man...” Clay shook his head. “I was at church that day, but didn’t see it.” He grinned. “Too busy stuffing my face. But Pa had himself a front row seat when Frank Cooper took a shot at Mister Henry. According to all the reports, he ran straight at the drunk, gun or no.”

“No one could ever call him a coward.”

“No, sir. But then if Levi Baylor hadn’t of been there to pull him off, Henry would have beat the man to death.”

“Can’t say I would have blamed him. The man just shot him, not to mention put all the Buckmeyers’ lives in danger—everyone there as a matter of fact.”

“And have you heard about the big fight between Henry and that Bull guy in New Orleans?”

“Guess so. One of Jean Paul’s cousins was talking about it. How Henry had to fight this guy so he’d sell him Miss Jewel’s brother. Big Hoss, right? That what you’re talking about?”

“Figure it is, but the way I heard it, Henry was getting the worst of it, but then finally got Bull on the ropes. Would have beat that one to death, too, ’cept Levi Baylor pulled him off again.”

Pulling the wagon over to the far right, Elijah made room for a family he hadn’t met and tipped his hat as they passed.

“Still, if the cousins’ version is true. The bad blood between the two went all the way back to the War of 1812, and that Glover set up the fight his own self.”

“That’s what I heard, too.” A moment’s silence hung between in the air, as though Clay watched a scene unfolding on his mind’s eye. “But still, I wouldn’t expect Mister Henry to turn the other cheek if I was so stupid as to slap him.”

That tickled Elijah. The image of the boy slapping the man. At first he did his best to keep it in his belly, but he couldn’t hold it in and erupted in a full blown volley.

“What now?”

Elijah laughed so hard, his eyes watered and nose dripped. The boy lost his anger and joined in without even knowing what he was laughing about. But finally he found himself. “Oh, the thought of you slapping Henry. Just more than I could take.”

“I’s only laughing at your silly guffaws.” The tone came back.

“You’re not a fool, Clay.” Elijah wiped his eyes dry on his sleeve. “Hitting the father of the girl you love would be about the most ludicrous thing ever. You’ve got to admit.”

Clay bumped his shoulder. "You cussing me?" His tone sounded jovial again, not angry. "What does that word mean? Ludicrous?"

"Preposterous."

"Oh."



Clay wanted to ask what preposterous meant, but figured he already showed enough of his lack of education. Wasn't his fault his pap had two bad years in a row, and he had to help in the fields instead of running off to the schoolhouse.

Then when things turned around, didn't seem right him sitting all day with a bunch of urchins, while his father and brothers worked. But he did know that word. Jake had called him one for as long as he could remember.

Might prove a good idea to get the heat off him. "So how much schooling you get?"

"None. Well, Ma taught me what she knew. The rest I got from books. Always loved reading. And well, good Lord blessed me with a keen eye. Sometimes I amaze myself."

Clay studied on the man for a few turns of the wagon's wheels. "How so?"

"Have I told you the story of when I met Moses Jones?"

"No, can't say as I recall you ever mentioning exactly how you met your other partner."

"Early on, Jethro Risen wouldn't come to town—on account of the China Doll, but that's another story—anyway, Moses shows up with one of Risen's drawings. Wants to know how quick I could forge it." The man chuckled.

"What was it?"

"Something he came up with to use at the mine. Right off, I see that he's only showing me a fourth of the hammer Jethro dreamed up. Didn't have a patent yet, and wanted to keep anyone from stealing the idea, so they were parting the castings out."

"What happened?"

"Oh, I ended up making it all, then a steam engine to run it. They'd thought of powering it with water. Good men, those two. You'll like them. Both gave up ten percent of their share to have me work at the mine full time."

Plenty of questions kept his new friend talking all the way to Clarksville, but the one inquiry heavy on his mind, Elijah couldn't answer any more than anyone else. Would Henry Buckmeyer ever allow him to court Gwendolyn?

A part of him said no, chided himself for hoping. But the part

closest to his heart shouted that he had to and refused any negative thinking. Then to his amazement, who but the man, his wife, and his two beauties waited in the Donoho's lobby?



Of all the men and boys Gwen had known, Clay Briggs clearly stood out as the best looking.

Shame his intelligence didn't match up with Elijah's, and so far as being debonair...well, poor guy couldn't compare with Braxton in that category. Then again, no one would probably call Daddy suave either.

She glanced over at him.

Being so distinguished and such a man's man, her father definitely overcame any shortcomings. Most likely though, she'd never find anyone to compare with him. So who exactly should she settle for?

Wasn't a bit fair Cecelia Carol swooped in and claimed Elijah as her own, eliminating him from Gwendolyn's choices.

The way her sister gushed over the man...well, downright ridiculous.

Perhaps she should reject them all and simply wait like Mama May.

Would there ever be a man out there who could best Daddy?

"So good to see you, sir." Clay extended his hand and shook her father's vigorously, then tipped his hat to May. "Evening, Ma'am."

Her father shook then nodded toward Gwendolyn and her sister standing to her right. "My girls were giving me all kinds of grief over not getting to send you two off."

"Oh, darling, you didn't hear the half of it." Mama laughed and slipped her hand under his arm then held it. She turned and grinned at the travelers. "I understood perfectly. You're going to be gone so long, our daughters only wanted to say goodbye properly." Gwen would be ever grateful for the woman's influence on her behalf.

"So here we are."

Why did Daddy always have to state the obvious?

Clay's dimpled grin about melted her heart, but did she really want to be saddled with a good-looking mama's boy? Nevermind he was seven years older than her.

Mercy, even Bonnie acted more mature than Mama Briggs' handsome baby boy. And on comparison, Braxton seemed far more the established man.

She returned Clay's smile, but held her peace until seated in the hotel's main dining room. Firmly ushering Daddy to a side table, Mama May winked at her.

How heavenly. She loved having a mother who understood and a father inclined to give her way more than not. How could she have known what she was missing before?

They'd be out of earshot, but not too far away. If truth be known, might take the man all of two seconds to have either of the younger men in a chokehold if the need arose, and he could probably have them both down in under a minute.

She studied the youngest Briggs. Would he be anywhere near as protective?

"How'd your mama take it? You going west with Elijah."

"About like I figured." He chuckled. "Least she didn't order Jake to hogtie me."

From what he'd said before—though she could hardly believe he told it on himself—that had happened more than once. "And how is your family? Everyone fine?"

He nodded in agreement then talked a bit about them. She enjoyed listening to him. He spoke with a pleasant tone. Hopefully, his voice would deepen with age.

Spinning a good yarn, he had CeCe and Elijah laughing all the way through, but then he hushed as if he didn't want to talk all the time. She liked him being a good conversationalist.

Under the table, his knee touched hers. And her heartbeat quickened.

The waiter came and placed a plate of steak with all the fixings in front of Gwendolyn first then the other three. She glanced at her father who nodded. Why did he do that? What if she wanted something different? She smiled at him anyway.

Guess he figured since he was footing the tab, he could order whatever he suspected everyone would love.

Elijah and CeCe spent more time cooing than eating, like their love was so strong and deep, they didn't even need food. Clay on the other hand ate steady and sure, but did manage a bit of small talk along the way.

While she'd have preferred the long looks and sweet words, she wasn't certain from whom? Him or Braxton? Or some as yet unknown suitor?

Like he knew her thoughts, Clay set his fork down, his plate still half full, and leaned toward her. "Remember the first time you spoke to me?"

She searched her recollections, but couldn't recall a specific time. The youngest of the handsome Briggs brothers had pretty much been around her whole life. "No, can't say that I do. Seems like we've known each other forever."

"True, but I wasn't paying you no never mind, not until the big

summer fish fry of '48. You remember that?"

She nodded. How could she forget? "Seems to me, you only had eyes for Mary Rachel back then."

"Yeah, your sister is a beauty all right, but you...well, you were so young then. Anyway, thought I was, but she only had eyes for Caleb Wheeler."

"I remember we'd just finished seining the river and helping Rebecca gather the keepers, hurrying to throw the others back into the water."

"That's right, fun times."

"I got in your way, remember that?"

It all came back. Sitting there next to the Red, grinning at her instead of putting on his boots, so he could be of some use. "I remember you lollygagging and not helping."

"Hey, I was thunderstruck, like the first time I'd ever really noticed you." He smiled and leaned ever closer. "I've been in love with you ever since. Remember what you said to me?"

"No, what?"

Love. Did he really know what that meant? She didn't. How could someone who'd never been kissed know anything about romantic love? She loved her family and...she glanced at her father, deep in conversation with some man who'd pulled up a chair.

Clay's face ever closer sent a heady wave over her.

Was she about to faint? He smelled so good.

What would it be like to press her lips against his?

Her heart beat double time trying to break out of her ribs.

Downright wrong, her sister getting kissed first.

But Gwendolyn would pay dearly if her father caught her kissing him right there in the Donoho's dining room. The idiot would probably kiss her back, and then Daddy would kill him on the spot.

She leaned back and grinned.

"What's funny?"

She snickered, glanced at her father still engrossed in his conversation, then sat forward again, but not too close. "Oh, I just saved your life."

"What?"

"You come back, Clay Briggs, and I'll tell you all about it. Now what was it I supposedly said to you at the fish fry?"

"If I tell you, will you tell me what you meant?"

So many things had happened that summer before she turned fourteen.

Sorting through the yards of material she and Miss Laura had sown to make all the new dresses her blooming bosom demanded, she shooed away all the boys who suddenly decided she didn't need to be

chased any longer and focused on the day of the fish fry.

Hot. She did remember it being almost unbearably hot.

Seemed to her she didn't say anything when she caught him staring at her. Then like a bolt of lightning it hit her. "Mercy."

"Exactly. Now pray tell, Gwendolyn Buckmeyer, what did you mean by that?"

She gave him her best smile, the one she'd spent hours practicing. "Come back, and I'll tell you that, too. But seeing as how you're running off to God only knows where...well...then what's the point?"

His mirth faded, replaced by the most serious, manly expression she'd ever seen on his handsome face. "Will you wait for me?"

Chapter Fifteen

That evening a storm rolled across the prairie, broke the breath-sucking heat, and sent an almost cool breeze to flutter Gwen's lace curtains. More than bearable.

After rocking Crockett to sleep, she replayed every word of her last minutes with Clay, wondering when she might see him again. She loved him saying that he loved her almost as much as she hated him running off with Elijah.

Poor CeCe. So heartsick over her fiancé leaving, she'd bawled most the night. Gwen even cried with her some, but not over Clay going.

Shedding tears less over them leaving, she cried rather over being so torn, not knowing who she wanted; if she could only decide. Braxton was so much more the man, but he'd run off, too.

However, his proved a better reason. After all, his friend died.

Clay Briggs only left because he wanted to have an adventure. Still the boy in him. Maybe he would come home a man.

If only her heart could be as sure as her sister's. No indecision from Cecelia. Three handsome men around, and she knew immediately who she wanted and jumped straight in over her head. She loved Elijah Eversole with her whole heart.

More than life, she'd said. But how did she know?

Gwendolyn didn't feel anywhere near as strong about Braxton or Clay.

Could it be that neither one was right?

Would she ever know true love?

Preparations for the big Independence Day picnic brought some respite. Unlike most Fourths, she volunteered to help in the kitchen. If she planned on becoming a wife, best learn more about preparing meals.

No cook would be coming along to her new home. Oh, just the thought of her own home gave her glory bumps!

Think of it! A husband and babies of her very own.

Folks lauded her seamstress skills all over the county, always took a blue ribbon at the fair. Had since only a nine-year-old. Looking pretty didn't throw her any knots, had that part down plenty smooth.

And everyone bragged on her natural ways with babies. Still, having Miss Jewel or someone like her in the kitchen would be such a

blessing.

Mama May had been blessed like that, but she sure enough whispered in Gwendolyn's ear that all wives needed to know at least the basics—all the basics. Even cleaning. And planting the garden, hoeing it, too.

And taking care of the nasty chickens, too, she supposed. Those stupid birds doodooed everywhere. Mercy, she'd be so busy. Did she want to sign up for all that with Clay? Or Braxton?

Or anyone? She actually might understand Mama May's procrastination more and more.

As most years, the Fourth of July celebration ended with a bang. Lots of firecrackers and pistols shot in the air. But...of all the attention the men and boys paid her, none measured up to the two suitors she already juggled.

Poor old man Wilson proved the funniest and most entertaining, flashing his toothless grin whenever he caught her eye, but what was he thinking? Even if she was so crazy as to want to marry a man in his forties, her father would never allow it.

July burned its way to August. Only thing worse than 1853's summer heat proved to be its horrible humidity. In Gwen's almost nineteen years, she couldn't remember it being so choking muggy.

The rain had been great, especially for the cotton—her family's biggest cash crop—but the few hours of relief from the heat came at such a high price.

The boys hurried through their chores then stayed in the stock pool, only coming in for supper. She and her sisters and Mama May had taken to bathing most evenings while the men and boys saw to the dishes.

Sure didn't need to bother kindling a fire. The cooler the water the better, its release way more than welcome.

One such splashy evening, as Mama May climbed out of the cedar tub Daddy had built for Gwen's mother so many years before, realization smacked her hard.

Her stepmother's thin cotton chemise clung to her form. She wasn't letting herself go as Gwen and Cecelia had speculated.

"Mama?"

May grabbed a towel, then turned around, a look of sweet surprise on her face. "Yes, dear?"

"When do you expect the tiny blessing?"

Her smile widened. "I suppose sometime just after the New Year."

Gwendolyn beat her sisters out of the water, but Bonnie squealed first.

Hugs and kisses flowed!

Happy tears, but mingled with a few of regret that it wasn't her

with child. Gwen led the charge congratulating her father on the newest Buckmeyer. Mostly, he seemed pleased, but she detected a bit of remorse in his tone and in his eyes.

That night while she lay on her pillow staring into the darkness, contemplating the prospect of another baby, a tear filled her eye, and a twang of jealousy swirled across and through her heart.

Mary Rachel had beat them all with two babies who'd have an uncle or aunt younger than them. Rebecca and Wallace Rusk had not been blessed.

Levi and Rose just welcomed their third boy, baby Wallace Rusk after the first of the year—five boys! Maybe the new wee Buckmeyer would be born on his birthday.

Life wasn't fair, two good-looking men had been vying for her hand, showering her with their attentions, and now she didn't have any. To make it worse, her younger sister settled her future with Elijah and Daddy's blessing.

They would be married come spring then probably nine months and a day later, bring another baby into Gwendolyn's life to love who wasn't her own.

Tears welled then overflowed. Nothing was fair!

The sweltering heat.

Clay and Braxton so far away.

And her getting older by the minute.

Gracious, Lord, I'm almost a spinster.



That same night, four hundred and sixty miles east by southeast, in the seediest park of New Orleans, the section of the French Quarter called the Swamp, where gamblers, whores, thieves, and cheats plied their trade on each other and any unfortunate pilgrim who happened to fall into their dens of iniquity, a hawk became a pigeon.

Like all the regulars at the tables, Braxton's fortunes peaked and plummeted. Better than most, his skill proved dampened of late by his lust for a beautiful mulatto he'd danced with two Sundays past in Congo Square.

Her master wanted three thousand for the slave, and Braxton was short.

His stake turned into scared money, and instead of his usual conservative style of play, he pressed. Then wholly contrary to his personal code, exhausted all lines of credit.

Save one.

Half past midnight, he stopped outside the Bourbon Street two-

story and turned his ear to the dimly lit balcony. No snorts and raspy snores rode the muggy breeze. The Bull was up. Braxton keyed the lock and slipped inside.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he hurried up and rapped a knuckle on the door. After two lungs' full of stale air, he pushed it open.

The old man, bathed in lamp light, sat next to the window, a drink in his hand, reading a book. How quaint. Where was his latest soiled dove?

He tucked a slip of paper between two pages then lay the tome in his lap. "Saints alive, boy, where have you been?"

"I need a loan."

The Bull eyed him a bit then nodded. "How much?"

"Five thousand."

"Tidy sum. Last I heard, you weren't that far in."

"Still not, but there's a slave I want to buy."

"Ah yes. The mulatto in Congo Square. Sofie, right? Handsome woman."

"Anything go on in this town you don't know about?"

He snorted a grin. "Hardly. Should be taking after the English. We treat our slaves too good, giving 'em Sunday afternoons off, acting like they have rights."

"Where's your charity, old man? Of course they do, and –"

"And nothing, Son, they're property, pure and simple. No more than a dog or a mule. Think a mule ought to have Sundays off, too?" The man turned his face away and stared out the window. "If Greely and his bunch get their way, the darkies will all be free men. Every last, cursed one."

Braxton had heard it all before, no need to argue, not when he needed funds.

The old man looked back. "You been writing to Henry's baby girl?"

"Just the once."

"Why not more?"

"She's..."

"What? Too good for the likes of you?" He grinned. "What name did you give them?"

"Hightower."

"That's right, I remember now."

"Beside the girl, how much you really need?"

"They cut me off at a grand."

"You telling me he's asking four for that girl?"

"No, sir, three."

"What were you planning to do with the other thousand?"

“Turn it into five, so I could pay you back.”

“Whatever. You ready to do what I want?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Good.” The Bull of his woods rubbed his hands together then nodded. “I’ll take care of your markers, and buy that slave girl you want, but she’s mine. Until you wed one of Henry Buckmeyer’s daughters.”

Braxton hated the thought of his beauty living there with the old man, but what choice did he have? “You detest Henry that much, Father?”

For the longest, the man didn’t respond, then a sly grin etched his face. “I’ll have my revenge, Son. And you can have your high-priced, high-yeller gal—and a rich wife to boot.”

The next day, after buying his marker back with the one from his father, but before any deal made for the object of his burning desire, Braxton decided a bit of a change to be in order.

His father sat on the patio of his favorite Bourbon Street watering hole, sipping coffee, reading the same book from the night before.

Taking the open chair across from the old man, he caught the waiter’s attention and pointed to his father’s almost empty cup.

With his own steaming brew, dashed with a shot of whiskey, half swilled, he set the mug down hard onto the wrought-iron table. “I’ve decided to change our arrangement a little.”

The Bull looked up, marked his place with a finger, and pointed his book’s cover toward Braxton. “You read any of May Meriwether’s novels?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re a fool then.”

How many times had he heard that? Not doing this or that or doing that or this; made no difference. Always made him a fool for it. But he wasn’t the one carrying a thirty-year-old grudge. He huffed.

“If you say so, Father. Told your man to fetch my bags. I’m moving back into my old room.”

A snort, followed by a sip of java, eventually turned into a little smile. “Suppose you’re fancying a few days with my new slave.”

“I want a month.”

The man looked off. His eyes followed a full-skirted field hand down the street toting a bowl of cantaloupes balanced on her head. Once she turned the corner, he looked back.

“Let’s make it two, if....” He smiled big enough to reveal his gold-plated jaw tooth. “You toe the mark. I mean no cards, up every day with the sun, and tending to my business.”

Sixty days. Anything could happen in that much time, and what the old man didn’t know...except so connected, not much happened in

this town that escaped him.

But Braxton knew of a few of Claude's old haunts that even Bull Glover didn't have eyes in. "Deal, but might as well call it the first of January."

"Why's that?"

"Wouldn't want to miss the holidays with my dear old dad."

Bull stuck out his hand. "A letter a week, and do some shopping. Send the little lady a few love trinkets."

Braxton hesitated, but what else did he have to pass his time? He could pick up his Sofie a trinket or two as well. "Fine, but Henry Buckmeyer is liable to kill us both."



The fifth day of August, 1853, found Clay Briggs standing on a pier watching the offloading of his and Elijah's steamer trunks, but more important—according to his friend—the ten cases of high pressure hoses.

The man extolled the value of his purchased in New Orleans. Clay had never seen so many gold coins in all his days, but then his pap handled the money.

The teamster finished the bills of laden, signed them both, then handed over the papers. Elijah signed one and handed it back. "How quick can you get there?"

"Three hour, no more'n four. I's gots to get up Broadway first, then I'll come around to yous directly."

"You been there before?"

"Oh yes, sir. Everyone knows the Lone Star, Miss Mary's Mercantile."

Elijah folded the bill and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. "See you then."

He touched Clay's elbow. "Come on, we'll find a hack."

"Thought we was riding with our goods?"

"Take too long."

Clay had adored New Orleans. The city's rhythmic buzz set his feet to dancing, but from what he'd seen of San Francisco, he might love this town even more. Raw, yet rich, yellow-skinned men scurried about and other foreigners spouted strange words. While not as hectic, it all worked.

Bless the ocean breeze, blew all the bugs right on through. Wouldn't miss the mosquitoes and flies one little bit.

He matched strides with the man he'd grown to like better than any of his brothers. Pu him in mind of the story about David and how

he loved King Saul's son Jonathon more than any of his own kin.

Elijah Eversole showed him respect instead of always knocking him around and taking picks.

A few blocks from the wharf, an oriental man with a long black pigtail swinging against his back, sped by, pulling a big-wheeled buggy with a high and mighty lady riding, her face mostly covered by a ruffled parasol.

Before he got a good look, they turned at the next corner. The man ran flat out as though about to miss supper.

"Where do you suppose that guy's going in such a hurry?"

"China Town."

"What's that?"



What would it hurt? Elijah's young friend's obvious delight with what little he'd seen of San Francisco amused him.

For his money, he'd rather be back in Texas with his love, but seemed young Mister Briggs' intrigue focused far more on the grand adventure of a new world than any romantic notions.

Elijah loved being a changed man now, born again.

He could show Clay around China Town, and still get to the Mercantile before his goods.

Chapter Sixteen



Rhythmic hammer blows pounded behind both eyes.

Elijah rolled over and told his lids to open, but they refused. Where was he?

A door creaked open. "Mister Eversole, sir?"

The voice sounded sweet, but not exactly like his Cecelia's.

"What?" His lips protested the movement. Were they bleeding?

"You awake?"

"No. Where am I?"

"Well, it sounds to me like you are, and Daddy wants to see you. He sent me to get you if you were awake. So if you're talking, then you got to be."

He filled his lungs. His ribs begged him to stop. To oblige them, he exhaled slowly. By sheer force of will, he pried one lid to crack open. Francy stood in the half-opened door. "Baby girl, where am I?"

"In our new home. Like it? You're in the cook's quarters, except we ain't got no cook yet, so you're using her room. Do you know how?"

He tilted his head a bit. "What? How to what?"

"Cook!"

Shaking his head ever so slightly, he fell back onto the pillow. "Some."

"So, you do?"

"What, Francy? Can you leave me alone?"

"Like it! Our new house and the cook's room. Ain't it pretty?"

He cracked the same eye again and tilted his head the slightest he possibly could get away with and still see the room. Wallpaper looked new and stylish, nice enough. And the extra-wide woodwork's fresh off-white paint framed it quite well.

"Sure. Go away now, and let me go back to sleep."

"I don't think that's a very good idea. Daddy's mad. You best get on up and face the music."

The door swung all the way open. Jethro Risen himself stood next to his adopted daughter. "Afternoon, Elijah."

He nodded. "Where's the water closet?"

"To your right. Come on, Francy. Let's go put on some coffee. Our guest is going to need it."

The door swung toward its place.

“Wait. Where’s Clay Briggs?”

“Upstairs, but let him sleep. He’s worse off than you.”

Two dry heaves, then half a cup of coffee later, as he sat Jethro’s new kitchen table, every last detail flooded his soul like the Lord wanted him to remember it all, so he’d never be tempted again. He drained his cup.

“More?” Jethro reached for the dainty little mug.

“Please.”

His partner—except the man was way more—stood, filled the saucerless beaker of porcelain, then set it in front of him. “Care to tell me what happened?”

He inhaled, but stopped short. The pain proved much greater than his need of air. “I’m a fool, Jethro. Just like that dog returning to his vomit, I returned to my folly.”

Quoting the scripture seemed to soften the older man’s countenance. “Elaborate.”

“After my folks got the fever and lit out, well...” He closed his eyes and let his mind’s eye wander back to those awful lonely days. He hated that time. But the word says confess your faults one to another, and he’d never told a soul. “The melancholy hit me hard. Whiskey helped for a time, but...” He rubbed his throbbing temples. Why had he ever taken that first drink? “I hated the next-mornings. Hated it that my work suffered, too.”

He looked away.

“Continue.” Bless Jethro’s heart.

Thankful it was just the two of them, Elijah went on. “One idiotic night, I went with this miner I’d done some work for to China Town. Like the fool I am, I shared a pipe with him.” He looked back.

His friend hiked his chin a bit and raised his brows. “Opium?” Elijah nodded.

“What about yesterday? You share a pipe with this Clay?”

“No, sir. A rickshaw passed us and turned into China Town. The boy wanted to know about it. I thought...” He looked away again. A fool indeed. Never should have taken another drink. Should have known better.

“What did you think?”

He looked back, studied his coffee cup, mustered some courage, then took in as much air as his sore ribs allowed.

“That one drink couldn’t hurt. Pride, nothing but my pride. Clay ordered a beer, and I didn’t want to admit I had a problem before. ‘Course, that one tasted so good, then we had a saki...he’d never tried rice wine.”

“Tell me about the fight.”

“Not much to tell. Wine is a mocker, strong drink raging. Clay and this loud-mouthed miner got into it. I had to help; the guy had forty pounds on him. Then the miner’s friends got involved.”

“Damages were considerable.”

“Yes, sir. Who do I need to see about them?”

Jethro shook his head. “I told the man to send the bill to the bank, and warned Father to expect it.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course. Now how is it that you’re back from Texas so early?”

Elijah would have preferred to return to bed, but instead, he shared stories of his time at the Buckmeyers’ and why he invited Clay Briggs to return with him.

“Interesting. Shame Mary Rachel wasn’t here to hear it all, but then she’ll want more detail.” Of course what woman didn’t relish every bit of news from home? “And...” Jethro grimaced. “In my opinion, you should be telling Henry about your past, too. Next time you see him. Don’t put it off.”

For a long while, Elijah didn’t respond. The man had only asked whether he believed and had been baptized.

Never questioned him about his life before he’d met Brother Paul and turned it all over to the Lord. “Suppose you’re right. May the Lord have mercy on my soul.”

Jethro chuckled. “So I take it you found Mary Rachel’s father as advertised?”

“Oh, yes. And more.”



The miner’s fist crashed into Clay’s jaw. He stumbled, righted himself, then turned as he drew back. The man had vanished. Instead, Gwendolyn stood before him.

“You going to hit me, Clay Briggs?”

“No, of course not. Never.” He retreated a step.

“You say you love me, yet you ran off to San Francisco.”

“I had to, sweetheart.”

“Don’t be calling me any of your pet names. Off having your grand adventure, sailing on steamers, drinking whiskey and brawling, and I saw you ogling that sporting lady. You going back tonight to see her?”

“No, Gwen. I’d never....”

“Well, Clay, you might as well. I’m marrying Braxton Hightower.”

“No, you can’t.” He sat up. His head exploded, forcing him back down. “Gwendolyn?” He reached out, but she wasn’t there. Only a

dream. That's all, just a bad dream. She loved him. He'd seen it in her eyes at the Donoho. Henry wouldn't let her marry that chowderhead dandy, but what if she ran off? Like Mary Rachel.

Wait. He rolled over and spied his surroundings. Where was he?

Oh, man...in big trouble for sure, no matter where... Least no bars held him in. Good thing Ma lived more than fifteen hundred miles away—way—back in Texas. He raised his head. The pounding in his temples forced it back down.

His stomach roiled. Bile came halfway up his throat, burning, then hovered, threatening eruption.

Best find the outhouse. He slid off the bed. A sledge pounded his head as he stumbled toward the door.

A water closet? Where was he?

No answer came, only the contents of his stomach.

The retches finally stopped, leaving a horrible taste, but his mouth suffered nothing compared to the pain in his head. And pulverized ribs. No brother had ever hit him as hard as that miner.

Him and his big mouth. He eased out and surveyed the room. His steamer trunk, the one Elijah bought for him in New Orleans, sat on a short table or stool at the foot of his bed.

Was it some fancy hotel?

After washing up at the sink with running water, he eased into a clean shirt and fresh britches, then figured once he found some coffee, he'd be almost human again.

Humph.

His door didn't have any numbers, neither did any of the others in the hall. He put one foot on a stair, then the other. On each descending step, he hung on tighter to the rail.

At the bottom, he followed his nose and voices through two rooms. Elijah sat across from what had to be Jethro Risen. Clay had heard so much about Mary Rachel's second husband, seemed like he knew him.

"Hey, Clay, there you are. Want some coffee?"

"Please."



Jethro Risen waved his partner back down, then got a cup for the young man who, according to Elijah, was head over heels in love with Gwen. Handsome enough.

Well, he would be again once the swelling went down and the bruises vanished. He swallowed the mirth that threatened to erupt as full-blown guffaws.

Wouldn't do him laughing at these two's misery. But then the Word said a man reaped what he sowed. The boys sure had themselves a bumper crop coming.

He handed Clay the coffee, then faced his partner. "That teamster delivered the ten cases of hose you bought in New Orleans."

"Good. If they work like I think, we can double—maybe even triple—production at the mine."

"What did we have to give for them?"

While Elijah justified his rather expensive purchase, Jethro marveled at the transformation in the younger man.

Contrite before, once he launched into his explanation of why he spent so much on the hose and how he planned on using them at the mine, seemed his aches and pains all but vanished, and a confidence that belied his years took hold.

"Enough said, proof will come in the doing. And it isn't like you haven't earned the right to spend our money however you see fit."

Like he could at last relax, Elijah eased back in his chair. "Thank you, sir."

Again, Jethro stifled his mirth. If he had a mean streak, he'd mention the coming confrontation with Cecelia's father just to see how his partner reacted, but he himself had dreaded his own trial by the man's fire.

So instead, he turned his attention to young Mister Briggs. Could be—if Elijah was right—this boy might be his brother-in-law come next spring.

"So you're in love with my wife's sister?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir. With my whole heart, and for over four years now."

"Why'd you agree to come west then?"

Clay filled his lungs then smiled. Or was it a grimace? Jethro wasn't quite sure with the boy's lips so swollen. "You, sir, and Elijah, maybe even Mister Moses Jones some."

"Me and Moses? You left that beautiful young lady you love to come see us?"

"Yes, sir, and...well...you see... I'm the baby, and my Ma...oh, Lord. Truth is she about smothers me. And Pa...well...him and the brothers lets her. Guess it keeps her off them. Anyways, I figured if I was out here with y'all, you and Elijah —"

"Stop right there." Jethro held his hands up. "First off, if you plan on getting past Henry Buckmeyer, then you need to always think before you say a word. About anything at any time."

"Yes, sir. Elijah said you and Wallace Rusk were the only two men alive who'd done just that. And that Captain Rusk backed into it 'cause of Levi Baylor and him rangering together."

“First of all, never ever underestimate Wallace Rusk, either. But yes, he and I are the only two. So guess our Elijah here’s number three, and he tells me you’re his choice for Gwendolyn.”

“Yes, sir. I hope so, sir. Any way you could help will be boss, sir.”



That exact moment, Gwendolyn sat at her writing desk struggling to find the precise words she needed. An afternoon shower had cooled the house enough to bear being upstairs with the door shut.

If only she and CeCe hadn’t pestered Daddy to go see Clay and Elijah off. But she had, and she’d given him false hope.

But now she had to tell him.

She crumpled the last draft and retrieved another leaf.

That was it. No way around the facts. No two pages of boring news. No nothing but the truth, tell him what’s in her heart.

The quill paused over the inkwell like it refused to be party to the bad news that compelled her to write. She set the feather down, reread Braxton’s latest letter, steeled her hand, and dipped the tip into the poisonous liquid.

August 6th, 1853

Dear Clay,

*Hope this letter finds you well and safely arrived in San Francisco.
Did you give Mary Rachel my love?*

Stop it, put your heart on the paper and be done with Clay Briggs for once and for all.

I’ve come to know something I must share...from my heart. You see, I love Braxton. As soon as he and I can convince Daddy that the Good Lord truly fashioned us for one another, I have agreed to wed him. So we will be married. Probably before you ever even get back to Texas.

So I wanted to let you know there’s no hurry in returning, and not let you continue thinking I’m here waiting as that would be less than honest and certainly not one bit fair to you. I saw your folks at church on Sunday—except your pa, he stayed home. Not feeling well, your ma said. The rest were all fine.

Your mother acted as though she was upset with me. Most likely because she said you haven’t written her either, and well, guess she thought you’d been writing me every day. Thinking how you supposedly loved me... I don’t know if you professed your love for me to her. I can only assume...but then I also assumed you’d write.

Anyway, after I let her know I haven't heard a word from you either, she acted sorry for my sake.

Clay, somewhere out there, a girl is waiting on you. She'll be perfect, but I advise that when you meet her, you do not run off halfway around the world and leave her alone. She'll be right for you, but that woman is not me. I once thought so, but know now for sure and for certain.

Please don't hate me, and I'll always be...

Forever your friend,

Gwendolyn Bell Buckmeyer

She held the single page up, and waved it slightly, pondering, until past time enough to dry. But, instead of folding it and placing it into an envelope, she opened the desk drawer, and laid it on top of the stack.

Had she really shared her heart with him? Did she truly love Braxton? She'd known Clay her whole life.

Writing it made her shaky inside...and sad.

Once she'd been certain he was the one.

Why had he run off to California with Elijah? The turkey buzzard. Gone and left her there alone. And then not bothered to write. How dare he value her so unworthy of his thoughts or time.

She stood and walked to her balcony. If only she knew for sure. How could she?

Why Lord, did they both have to run off?

Chapter Seventeen



The next morning while Gwen and her sisters helped Mama May boil the laundry, she vacillated over sending the letter to Clay, then in the end, decided it could wait. Wasn't like Braxton had come back.

Mercy though—as her father was want to say—the man could definitely pen a moving letter, and so many thrilled her.

What a stroke of genius him sending her that poetry book. Once she figured out his true feelings for her encoded within the pages, she loved him even more. But what difference did any distance make?

New Orleans might as well have been as San Francisco; gone was gone. Still, at least he worked on a worthwhile project, while she had no idea of Clay's goings-on.

Still, not one word from him.

Even raising money during the day for the Sisters of Mercy and spending his evenings helping the Nuns care for the poor orphans and widows, Braxton found the time to write faithfully once a week.

The convent spent their every dime out of compassion for their parishioners so devastated by the fever.

What a good man her beau proved to be, helping them.

Another black mark against Clay. He was off playing in the gold fields like a ten-year-old with Elijah, while Braxton helped those less fortunate. That's what Daddy would do. Her Louisiana man valued and deserved her hand so much more.

"Come get me, Mister Hightower. I'll happily work right alongside you."

"What did you say?"

Gwen looked across the wash pot. "Oh." She chuckled. "Didn't mean to say a word out loud. Only thinking about Braxton. How different he is from Clay Briggs."

Bonnie glanced over her shoulder, then leaned in resting on her stir paddle. "I don't know, Sister. If it were me, I'd pick Clay for sure and certain. He's twice the man of that dandy."

"You can't say that!"

"Sure can to. Just did."

"But you don't know any such thing. You've been sweet on Clay forever, and don't think I haven't noticed. But he's nothing but a plow boy. Braxton's a gentleman."

“Mama and Daddy don’t think so.” She glanced back again, then leaned in even closer. “Yesterday when we were playing hide and seek, I hid in the hayloft, and they came into the barn just chatting up a storm.”

Her baby sister grinned, like she wasn’t going to tell her what they spoke about, or exactly what they said.

“Go on.” Ooops. Miss Jewel glanced up from where she sat snapping beans into her lap. Had Gwen been too loud?

The little know-it-all looked over her shoulder again then smiled. “They’re concerned about Braxton sending you so many letters and gifts. Him being such a scoundrel and all.”

“Did our stepmother call him that? Or Daddy?”

“Both of them.” The big brat smirked an exaggerated nod then leaned back and made a show of stirring the wash.

She wanted to twist her ear until she took it all back, but... Mama May walked toward her cradling her medium-sized tummy. Why had she gone against Gwendolyn and sided with her pigheaded father?

A mother knows more how it is. But then May had never been a mother before Crockett was born, even though way past old enough.

To hear Henry Buckmeyer tell it, no man would ever be good enough for any of them. If only her stepmother would be a voice of reason. Mother or not, she knew the ways of a woman, and should’ve helped convince Daddy.

But no, instead, she’d swallowed a big dose of his stubbornness. Wasn’t fair.

Never had a grandmother...then losing her mama right after her tenth birthday.



As the muggy Louisiana summer turned into a steamy fall, Braxton slowed his letter writing and gift giving considerably. But last night, the first semi-cool evening in all of October, his father reminded him over a nice gumbo of being tardy, that the next missive was overdue. Why did he have to keep such an eye on him?

“Yes, Father, I’m working on one.”

“What about another gift? Get her something expensive, a locket perhaps.”

He shrugged then glanced at Sofia, hating the sadness in her eyes, but what could he do? She knew the conditions of her purchase and what his father expected of him. He’d also told her over and again that the Texas gal meant nothing to him.

And explained every detail of the deal he’d agreed to in order to

buy her, so she couldn't complain, except she did.

"Get her something special to make up for not writing." The old man extracted his wallet from his breast pocket and handed over several bills.

Braxton scooped them up without counting, a small consideration.

Soon his father turned his attention to his week-old New York news, and nodded toward Braxton's room. He got no joy from deceiving Gwendolyn, but didn't see a way around another letter. Poor girl wasn't even born when her father bested his.

If the truth turned out more like the version Claude heard—God rest his sorry hide—that the first fight had been a draw up to the point when General Jackson stopped the bout.

But loudmouth Buckmeyer claimed he'd won based on the rules they fought under. He'd knocked the great Bull Glover down in the last round, so that made him the winner.

Nevermind, he toed the line and answered the bell for the next round.

Again, according to Raines, who actually witnessed their latest encounter, if Levi Baylor hadn't pulled Buckmeyer off, he would have killed dear old Dad. Wouldn't have been such a bad thing.

For sure, Braxton would never have gone to Texas and wouldn't be penning nauseating love letters to a girl he had not one whit of interest in wedding.

Sofia swept into his bedroom, her full skirt swaying with each step. "Here." She handed over a tumbler half full of single malt Scotch.

The one bright spot of living in his old room, his father's hooch... and a lesser advantage, the old man's cook—almost as good as Henry's. Why couldn't he have been born a Buckmeyer instead of a Glover?

He took the offering, sipped a taste, then returned to his almost blank piece of paper.

"Missy Gwen pretty?"

"Not tonight, baby. I need to get this written which I cannot do with you on my mind. But yes, she's a very pretty young woman, just like I've told you a thousand times. You, my love, are a thousand times more beautiful."

She kissed his neck and whispered into his ear. "She'll hate me."

"No, she won't. She'll love you, just like I do."

"No, she'll hate me every time you look my way." She leaned back and batted her lashes. "And see your son running around, calling me Mam."

He jumped to his feet. "Oh, Sofia. A baby? Are you sure?"

She smiled. "Maybe, maybe not. You want me to..." She grimaced.

“No, my love. Never. Don’t even think about that.” He wrapped his arms around her and smiled. “A baby.” He held her tight and swayed, singing softly in her ear.



Henry eyed the package sitting atop the stack of mail his friend placed on his desk. The three weeks without a letter from Hightower afforded a measure of false hope, but the scoundrel was at it again. He smiled at Jean Paul. “No papers? My New York Tribune is overdue.”

“No, sir; I asked.”

“Thanks. Anything new or interesting afoot?”

“Mister Briggs has taken sick. Ran into Jake, in town fetching medicine.”

“He say how bad?”

“A cold that turned into a hacking cough. Doc’s been out twice already.”

Henry hated to hear it. “Let’s remember to pray for him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anything else?”

“That first cotton draft come in. I took it on to the bank.”

“Good.” He eyed the neatly wrapped box. “If you see Gwen...”

Jean Paul backed up a step. “Yes, sir, she and the other ladies are out back boiling laundry.”

Of course, he knew that. “Leave her be, but see if May can join me.”

His young friend smiled. “Yes, sir.” Then the ex-slave disappeared.

Slowly, Henry unwrapped the package then extracted the jewelry box and letter. He ought to burn them both, but sooner or later, the toady would show up and asked about it, and stool him off. He flipped the box open. A gold locket. He pried the lid up, the man’s tiny image stared back at him.

If only he could change things, go back to that day so many years ago and swallow his pride. Agree the fight had been a draw. But he’d so enjoyed needling Bull. Would they have charged him with murder if Levi had left him alone?

Mercy, the man was trying to kill him. And now, he had sicced Hightower on Gwen. He studied on the locket. Not extravagant, but not cheap either. What had a picture that small cost him?

“That for me?”

“I wish. Hightower sent it.”

“Oh.” May slipped into the wingback, holding her tummy. “Let me see the letter.”

He handed it over then watched her read it. How was it possible that she had gotten even more beautiful?

She held it up to the window. "Nothing nefarious, that I can tell." She nodded toward the gift box. "Any notes in there?"

He shrugged then handed that over, too.

"I was hoping he'd had a falling out with Bull."

She nodded then placed them both back on the desk and sighed. "I was, too."

"Still think we should not tell her what we know?"

She snickered then shook her head. "Ever wonder why it was Eve and not Adam who took the first bite?"

"Word says she was deceived, but he knew what he was doing. That what you're talking about?"

"It says that? Where?"

"One of Paul's epistles, but what does that have to do with telling her?"

"I'd like to know exactly where that is, but it just makes my point all the more. Forbidden fruit, especially of the male variety, is hard to resist, but if our letter to Mary Rachel puts the bug in Clay's ear that he best write...."

He mulled over his wife's word. Made sense, but so did killing the young man next time he showed his lying face. Only took one no vote to hang a jury. "You're right. If we tell her she can't write him or receive his letters, the fop will only seem more attractive."

"Exactly."

"Oh, speaking of Clay, Jean Paul said old man Briggs is bad sick, a cold turned into a hacking cough."



Gwen loved the locket, and of course, she forgave him for not writing for three weeks running. The third time through reading her new letter, she realized its hidden message. For good measure, she waited until the house quieted.

Even got under the covers herself, but instead of hunting sleep, she encouraged her mind's eye to envision her walking the aisle toward Braxton.

What a glorious day that would be! Mister and Mis'ess Hightower. Shame Claude passed from that horrible fever, or he would be the best man. Levi Baylor or Wallace Rusk could stand in for him, if Braxton didn't want anyone else.

Would Mary Rachel come back for the wedding and serve as her matron of honor? If not, she'd ask Rebecca.

The first snore drifted upstairs. Gwen slipped out of bed, lit both lamps on her desk, then opened the locket. She hated prying his picture out, but if she'd gotten it right, that's where his real message would be hidden.

Her fingers trembled as she lifted the photograph with her pen knife, exactly like she figured, a tiny piece of paper.

She got out her poetry book and matched the numbers on the miniscule slip to the pages of poems. Soon she had the first line of his message.

Come to New Orleans, my love. Your journey be blessed from above.

Yes! She wanted nothing more! But how? Her father would never agree, not before the wedding. Would God approve?

She went to work on the second line.

I fear I've caught the fever, dear. How can I pass without you near?

Oh no! Was he going to die? She had to go to him. He needed her! She ran to the door then stopped. What was she thinking? Her pigheaded father would never allow it. Not alone. What was she going to do?

Chapter Eighteen



That night, Gwendolyn paced and prayed and begged the Lord to soften her father's heart. Just because he waited four years to talk to her mother, didn't mean she could wait any longer for Braxton.

She had to go to him. Take care of him. What if he died?

The rooster crowing up the sun woke her. For a few heartbeats, she marveled at being fully dressed on top of the bed covers.

But then like a dagger plunged into her chest, realization struck. She jumped up and ran downstairs. Positive of what had to be done.

Her father sat in the kitchen sipping coffee and chatting with her stepmother and Chester while Miss Jewel stirred what smelled and looked like thickening gravy at the stove. So normal the scene, except it wasn't.

Nothing might ever be normal again—not for her. At eighteen, she was certainly old enough to decide for herself.

Mary Rachel had done so a whole year younger.

"Daddy, I need my money. I'm going to New Orleans."

He turned in his chair and faced her, his eyes harder than steel. "Why, pray tell, do you want to do that?"

"Braxton's sick. I couldn't stand it if he died there alone, and I wasn't with him."

May jumped to her feet and moved in front of her father. "Mister Hightower didn't say one word about being ill. What makes you think that he is? What do you imagine is wrong with him?"

"His thinks it's the fever. If you've been reading my letters, too, then you know he's been helping the Sisters take care of the orphans and widows. There's so many poor children lost their parents to the fever. Husbands who died."

Her father stood and joined May. "Sweetheart, the man who came here, the man who has been writing you letters, doesn't exist. We don't know for sure who he is, but there's no Braxton Hightower in all of New Orleans."

"What are you saying? Are you crazy?" His words made not one iota of sense. Of course Braxton existed. His smile flashed across her mind's eye. "Why are saying that? You know he was here, you showed him around yourself. What do you mean he doesn't exist?"

"There is no Braxton Hightower, Gwendolyn."

She held out the locket he'd just sent. "How can you say that?"

Braxton just sent me this, and now he's sick. He wants me to come, and I fully intend to, Daddy. Please give me my money, so I can go."

"There's no way that I'll allow you to travel to New Orleans alone. I'll not give you a dime." Her father shook his head. "Sweetheart, I'm convinced Bull Glover is behind this. Your Uncle Chester here is the first one figured it out. Jean Paul asked around when he took that first load of cotton to New Orleans."

It couldn't be true! Bull Glover, her eye!

Miss Jewel moved the skillet and wiped her hands on her apron, turning toward her. "That's right, baby girl. Chester saw that letter to C. Raines."

"I am not a baby! And so what? Claude was Braxton's friend. They were in business together! What's that got to do with anything?" Gwen saw the hurt in the cook's eyes. She'd never spoken to her in that tone.

"Gwendolyn Belle!" Her father stepped forward.

Chester stood and went to Jewel.

"What?" She couldn't hold back the tears.

"You owe Miss Jewel an apology."

She sniffed and blinked back the tears. "Yes, Mammy, uh Miss Jewel, I'm sorry, it's them not you, please forgive me."

"Of course, sweet Gwen."

She returned the old dear's smile, then with a fire she'd never really let out burning through her, she faced her father. How dare him?

"You're being paranoid! Bull Glover? You're just making that up. Everything isn't about you, all high and mighty Henry Buckmeyer!"

She looked from him to May then Chester. She hated them all! Sneaking behind her back.

"Why, Daddy? Why do you hate me? Braxton is sick, and I need my money. It is mine, isn't it?"

"Baby, are you not hearing me? The man who came here is not Braxton Hightower. He's a liar. I'm not sure exactly what game he's playing, but please listen to me. It's all a ruse."

It couldn't be. He had to be wrong. "I'll ask Levi and Rose for a loan."

Her father huffed. "They aren't going to give you any money either. Not to chase after some con man. He lied to you, Gwen. He accepted our hospitality and lied to all of us."

Tears overflowed. She backed up a step. "Fine. If you're not going to help me, then I'll find someone who will." She turned.

"Wait, sweetheart. We'll go with you. We'll take you to New Orleans."

Mama May's words stopped her cold. She turned and stared at her

father. "Is that true? Will you?"

He nodded. "Give us time to pack."

The tears stopped. She exhaled then wiped her cheeks. "Thank you, Daddy."

"Thank your mother."

"Yes, sir." She went and hugged May's neck. "Thank you, Mama."



With stage tickets in hand, Henry nodded toward the Donoho's main dining room. "Get us a table. I want to check the mail."

Gwen fell in next to May, then stopped and turned around. She extracted an envelope from her clutch. "Daddy, will you post this for me?"

He took it, noted the address named Clay Briggs in care of Mary Rachel Risen. It pleased him Jethro called his firstborn by both her names. And Risen—though not Buckmeyer—sounded fine.

Didn't hate it like he thought he would.

Glancing over at his not-so-baby second born, he gave her a weak smile. Though never high on young Briggs, the boy towered over Hightower.

Or whoever he was.

Surely no joy in it, she returned his less than enthusiastic grin with what had to be an even weaker one. Of all things, he did not want to go to New Orleans. Not this day nor any other. But if his months' worth of Tribunes had come in, they'd definitely make the miles go faster.

Two blocks over and one up, he found himself in the newer sawed-board federal building.

"My New York papers here?"

The clerk nodded. "Yes, sir, came overnight."

"Good, anything else?"

The man grimaced. "Mister Henry, sir...well..." He looked away.

"What is it?"

He pulled a fat oversized envelope from under his counter. "I should have checked her, sir."

"What is it, man? Spit it out."

He extended the packet. "Found this in old man Broomfield's mail slot."

"Mercy, man, he's been dead six weeks or more."

"I know. It weren't until last night that I came across it. I'm sure sorry. Henry Broomfield, Henry Buckmeyer." He shook his head. "I should've checked the girl's work. It'll never happen again, sir."

He took the offering bearing his name penned in Mary Rachel's

unmistakable flowing script. “No harm. News from a far land is always welcome.”

“Thank you, sir. I was powerful concerned when I figured out the mistake and realized how long it’d been sitting there.”

He waved the man off, tucked the envelope inside his bundle of Tribunes, then strolled back to the Donoho. He joined May and Gwen, and like the waiter had been waiting on him, the man began serving.

Of course, she’d ordered him a steak. Halfway through, he set his fork down. “You ask them to pack us a basket? Something to go with what Miss Jewel sent?”

“Yes, sir. Just as we discussed. Did you think I’d forget?” May grinned, but her eyes and tone told him more than her words.

Why did he ever doubt the woman’s abilities or attention to detail? Mercy, she wrote prized novels. Even Nathaniel Hawthorne had begrudgingly elevated her work to a cut above the scribbling mob.

His off-handed comment had irritated Henry, but May counted it grand praise coming from such a renowned writer.



Once under way, Gwen allowed herself to relax a bit and snuggled into the far corner furthest from her daddy. Hardly able to believe it—that she was on her way—she closed her eyes. “Wake me when we get to Nacogdoches, please. I don’t want to miss the sights.”

“We’re going to Jefferson.”

She sat up. “But why? Isn’t that a full day longer?”

“It’s November. Rain doesn’t bother steamers. You ever had to push a stage out of the mud?”

“Oh, Daddy, don’t be silly.” He could be so irritating. She leaned back.

At least he was taking her. She never considered that scenario. He could have called her bluff, let her walk out. She opened one eye, staring at him reading his paper, but then it hadn’t been him.

Mama May was the one who stepped up and offered for them to take her. Catching her eye, Gwendolyn mouthed a ‘thank you so much.’

A ‘you’re welcome’ came right back with her daddy none the wiser.

“Oh. I forgot. This came a while back, and got put in Henry Broomfield’s slot by mistake.”

“Didn’t he die?”

“Indeed. Exactly why no one realized it before now.” He pulled a

fat full-sized envelope from his folded newspapers beside him and held it up.

Mama May grabbed it first. "Oh, glory! It's from Mary Rachel."

Gwen scooted around the center isle and snuggled in tight next to her stepmother. Meticulously slow, she carefully tore the envelope's side open then dumped the contents in her lap.

Three loose pages fluttered out in Mary Rachel's hand—Gwen would recognize it anywhere—and two regular-sized envelopes, one addressed to her, the other for Cecelia.

May offered Gwen's to her. She took the missive but didn't open it. Mercy, this had been sitting in the post office for how long?

For a bit, she read over her stepmother's shoulder.

"Oh, she's expecting again!"

A cloud shadowed her father's face. "Read it aloud."

Gwen settled back and listened to all the wonderful news. A new baby in February! Jethro must be beside himself. She couldn't imagine what it might be like living so far from the family, but her older sister seemed none the worse for it.

With little Susie and her new baby sister, Becca—and another on the way—maybe her older sister stayed busy enough she didn't think about it. Two new babies in the family next year, if only one was hers....

She'd reread and relish the letter later, see what her sister had to say between the lines.

The baby girls evidently grew like weeds, and Mary Rachel went on and on how cute and what a help Francy was mothering them both like they were more hers than her new mother's.

Only three pages of news, rather short for one of her sister's.

But seeing as how she stayed so busy most days with the Mercantile, and the babies, and the new orphanage Jethro was building and the gold mine, too, the wonder was her writing at all.

Having enough to tell didn't hinder a thing, that's for sure and certain. Gwen had hoped to hear a little more about Clay or Elijah other than that they arrived safely.

Probably her sister just didn't want to steal any of their thunder.

Without incident—no rain or getting stuck and pushing, or highway men for her father to shoot—the stage pulled into the bustling city in after only eight hours of bounding and swaying over the Jefferson Trace.

It would have tickled her how early the old folks called it a night if she hadn't wanted to see the sights.

But of late, Crockett always cried to sleep in his mama's bed as though he knew something was afoot with her swelling tummy.

Seeing Daddy together with May made her wish Braxton had met

them in Jefferson and that they were already married. One day soon, she'd have a husband to flirt with and tease.

Were they so naïve to think she didn't realize what they were up to?

As instructed, she locked herself in her hotel room and braced a chair against the knob. What could happen with her daddy right across the hall?

After changing into her nightgown and robe, she sat at the table and turned the wick up on its oil lamp then fingered Clay's envelope. Did she really want to read it? Her heart already belonged to Braxton.

Maybe the Lord delayed its arrival because He knew who He made her for. Still, poor Clay. Too bad she hadn't known he'd written, but it wouldn't change anything.

No, she wouldn't read it. Be too much like being unfaithful to Braxton. She laid it on the table then picked it back up. What would it hurt? Wasn't like she was doing anything wrong.

Could be he wrote to tell her he'd found someone else and would be staying in California.

After all, he'd still be her friend. Right? What would it hurt to hear about his trip? She tediously ripped the end off then shook out the pages. All seven of them.

July 3rd

Dear Gwen,

We're in Jefferson, I was so shocked that you were waiting for us in Clarksville. What a great surprise. I love you and miss you already, but I think me going with Elijah will turn out for the best. It's just so hard being apart from you. I'm praying for you every day and that it all works out like He wants it. I think it will.

July 4th

Dear lady, I watched the fireworks from the river

Never been on a steamboat before. It's like a floating hotel, or better. Well not for all the poorer folks on the lower decks. I wish you were here. Shame it ain't you taking this trip with me, it could've been our honeymoon. But I'm learning so much from Elijah. I love you sweet Gwen.

He'd missed her from the start.

All of a sudden it was hard to swallow.

His twelve-year-old smile across the Sunday covered-dish table flashed across her mind's eye, then the time he'd won the three

legged-race with Jake, he'd pumped his fist in the air, grinning right at her.

Of course she was jumping up and down, cheering his whole way. And when he walked back into church after being gone for so long harvesting, he'd grown so tall and had muscles. Her heartbeat increased just as it had that day.

Dear Lord, he's been my friend so long. I always thought....

July 5th

Tears blurred her vision, pooling in her eyes.

Why was she being so silly? One escaped and rolled down her cheek. The pages slipped from her hands. This wasn't right. These feelings were wrong. She loved Braxton, for goodness sakes. Right now she was on her way to him.

What if he died with the fever?

Maybe she shouldn't have sent that letter to Clay. Why had she been in such a hurry? And why had she insisted on going to Clarksville to see him off? She wiped both cheeks and blinked until she could see again.

Though needing rest, she wasn't the least bit sleepy. She stood, trimmed the wick, then sat down and turned it right back up. Couldn't leave the mess.

Retrieving the pages that fell to the floor, she scooped up the rest of Clay's letter and tapped all the pages on the table, straightening them. He'd taken the time to write. The least she could do was read his words. It'd be downright rude not to.

Braxton would just have to understand, if he ever knew.
Right?

Chapter Nineteen



“Junior, sir?”

Braxton held a hand up, then continued counting, but said the numbers out loud; the last stevedore passed in front of him and disappeared into the warehouse. “Sixty-three.” He marked the ledger then turned.

The Glovers’ oldest house slave stood on the pier behind him. “What is it, Uncle?”

“Your father say for you to get home in a hurry. Without delay, he say.”

“What about the count? The gang will be right back, and he’ll get cheated for sure.”

The man nodded. “Him say, ‘You take Junior’s place.’ ”

Braxton handed over the ledger. Never knew the old boy could read and write. “Did he say why?”

“No, sir.”

Curiosity spurred him from the wharf to Bourbon Street faster than normal. What was more important than seeing to business? He found his father upstairs in his room staring out the window.

The stale stench of the old man’s Cuban cigars and his hideous purple velvet drapes accosted his senses.

“What’s so important?”

“Gwendolyn is here.”

His breath caught. “Here as...in New Orleans?” He never dreamed she’d come. “How do you know? Where is she?”

“The stupid girl is in the company of her father and her stepmother. Staying at the St. Charles.” The man glared at him. “Did I not stress to you that she come alone? What’s the matter with you?”

“You did. And I assure you there’s nothing wrong with me, Father.” He exhaled, thinking of Gwendolyn, then the realization that Henry Buckmeyer was in the same town quickened his pulse. “Is Baylor or Rusk with him?”

“No, just the three of them. He made an inquiry at the desk about the whereabouts of one Braxton Hightower.”

He waited for the old man to finish, but he seemed to relish tormenting him. “And? What did the clerk tell him?”

“The truth of course. That he didn’t know the man. Only

Hightower he knew of had a plantation down river a ways.”

“Is Henry going there? Did he say?”

“Don’t know, but your mother’s people don’t know anything.”

“Henry’s smart though. He might piece it all together.”

Bull shook his head. “I doubt it. But what I want to know is why you didn’t tell that young woman of yours to come alone.”

“I never dreamed she’d come at all. Figured I could use getting the fever as my excuse for not coming there.”

He shook his head. “You’re a fool, Bubs. Didn’t it occur to you that she’d want to come nurse you back to health?”

“No, it never did. But it’s done, and she came. What are we going to do now?”

“You—for now—nothing. Stay here, lay low. I’ve dispatched Sofia to keep an eye on them.”

“What! Why? What if they spot her?”

“Oh, hold your mules. All down but nine, boy.” The old man shook his head as though disgusted. “What’s another nigger gal to those blue at the mizen Buckmeyers? She won’t stick out a bit, one of a thousand in New Orleans. And they don’t know her from the next darkie.” He stroked his goatee. “Henry won this round but he’ll get his just dessert.”

Braxton hated him for calling her either name. She wasn’t dark at all, and his father’s vindictive obsession with his old rival was beyond the pale, but until he could raise enough money to pay him off, he couldn’t say much otherwise.

“So what’s your plan?”

“Don’t know yet, but once I decide exactly what to do, I’ll not have you trying to beat the devil around the stump. You hear?”



Gwen took a sip of tea and spied another piece of crystal-encrusted, wrought-iron gracing the little café down the street from the hotel. She’d seen grand and gaudy a plenty in Europe. What a trip. She could never have imagined.

Perhaps she could surprise Braxton with tickets as a wedding gift.

But New Orleans offered its own special kind of ambiance that meshed the two—iron and crystal—into an interesting marriage. And the city’s pulse truly surprised her. She hadn’t expected it.

A quarter-beat ahead of most, but with a song that worked its way into the depths of her being. Interesting indeed, but she would not want to live there.

“Have you noticed that girl across the street?”

“Girl?” Gwen focused on her stepmother’s words. “What girl? Which street?” She glanced in the direction May’s eyes pointed, but the street teemed with activity.

And across it, the walks were crowded with men and women moving cargo and themselves in almost every direction. On the corner a musician played a banjo. “Which one?”

“No, no. Don’t look. She’ll know we’re talking about her. But I’d almost swear she has been staring at you for the last ten minutes.”

“Where?” She pretended to sip her tea, but couldn’t help cutting her eyes across the brick street still damp from the morning dew. Then she spotted her. No mistaking. The young woman glanced away the minute their eyes locked.

Had Gwen seen embarrassment? The light-skinned Negro sat under a gay red and yellow awning, back in its shadows.

The dark-haired beauty with curly ringlets falling over her shoulders glared. Was the woman glowering at Gwen? She turned and looked over her shoulder, half expecting to see a man who’d done the lady wrong, but there seemed to be no one.

What could she have possibly done to warrant such disdain?

“I think you’re right.” Gwen leaned back, took another sip of tea, and smiled at May. “Certainly don’t know what I’ve done to her. Shall we wait for Daddy inside?”

“No, I suppose not. She seems harmless, and our food will be here soon. It definitely is odd though.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She would have preferred getting away from the piercing gaze. Why if those daggers she slung were...then again, she and May both had Derringers in their clutches. She’d hate to kill anyone, but the young lady might need winging if she did anything other than stare.

Turning her shoulder in that direction, she determined to ignore her.

May had the best view to keep an eye on her. Plus, the mulatto never once looked at May, just Gwen. Very strange.

The food came. Flaky croissants loaded with cream cheese and ham, garnished with fresh tomato slices and a spicy yellow pickled pepper Gwen couldn’t recognize. She ate half, then set her fork down and tried in vain to wash the burn from her mouth.

“Wow.” She patted her chest with her fingertips. Great tasting, but plenty spicy.”

“I know, but I love them. Ate one first thing of a morning for...” Her stepmother looked away.

“What?”

She looked back. “Oh, I wasn’t a lot older than you the first time I came here.”

Gwen smiled then gave the older woman a four-finger, give-it-up hand curl.

“Not too far from here is a place the locals call the Swamp. It isn’t somewhere a young lady should ever go. But I did have Chester, and well...” She grimaced and leaned in close. “I’d just gotten my inheritance money, and...well...the gentry don’t play stud poker or shoot dice or...”

“Daddy know about this?”

“Yes, dear. He and I have no secrets.”

“So it’s like a place where people go to gamble?”

“Well, not really like one, it is such a place. One casino after another for a city block. All of them nothing but dens of iniquity.”

“Take me. Please. I want to see this place.”

“No, ma’am, not me. I will never go there again. Only a fool returns to her folly.”

Like a dog to his – but Gwen didn’t finish the verse even in her mind, much less give it voice. “How far is the post office?”

“Not too.”

“Good, I’m past ready to see Mister Hightower.” She scooted the peppers to the side and cleaned her plate. They’d see. Braxton would clear up the misunderstanding, and then she could get serious about planning her wedding.



The girl’s papa joined the two women, except the girl—the one nasty old father wanted her man to marry—was no woman, not even full-grown yet. Maybe only sixteen. And skin so sickie pale.

Humph. She’d never work in the fields one day in her whole life. Probably not a lick of good for nothing ’cept spend all the Glovers’ money.

Tiny little thing could never birth a baby.

Sofia hated all three of them.

The man ’cause he bring Missy Whiter-than-snow to her town and the girl’s mam for birthing her, except the two didn’t favor none at all. But no matter. Only important thing be her man buying herself free.

And if that meant sharing him with the weakly, fancy girl from Texas, so be it.

Being free would be worth it all. Sweeter than honey and all she want in the wide world.

And Bubba promised.

The females cut enough glances her way to be certain they seen her. Probably talking about her, too, but she didn’t care. Mister Bull

only say watch them, tell him everything they was up to.

Where they go, what they do. She liked the job. Beat working in the house or having to sweat all day on the docks.

One day she would own her own self, and then she could do whatever she wanted. No boss to make her do something she never want to.

The papa stood, looked right at her, then walked into the stream of folks hurrying along. Dodging buggies, he come straight toward her. Her heart beat like the Congo drums. She looked both ways.

What would he do to her? She jumped to her feet. Like a swamp deer running from a 'gater, bolted for Bourbon Street.

After telling Bull everything she saw, she joined Bubba in his room. At first, she held her tongue like the good slave she was, but he just sat there playing with his cards, not paying her one bit of mind. She tried not to let it show, but she hated him, too.

He say he love her and promise freedom one day, but he be mean to her whenever he wants, and his love be too rough.

He looked up from his stupid game. "Why'd you come back so soon?"

"The girl's mam saw me looking. Sent the papa to grab me, but I run for my life before he got close."

"I told the old man it was a bad idea to send you."

"You lie to me."

"About what?"

"That baby girl. She's prettier than me. Her skin so white and pure, not like her mam at all. And that hair the color of gold. You be such a liar."

He stood and held both her arms...too tight. "Sofia, you're wrong." His grip softened some. "You are surely the most beautiful female to ever walk this earth. Bar none." He pulled her toward him.

She held back, hoping he'd say more, but his eyes told her she best do 'xactly what he want. She smiled, then submitted to his embrace. "You truly think I'm prettier than that Texas gal, Missy Gwendolyn?"

He kissed her neck then whispered in her ear. "Yes, she's no more than an ugly ol' cow next to you, my love."

She pushed back and spun a full circle, her skirt fanning out. "Tell me true, who do you really love?"



Braxton grinned. He loved it when she danced for him. "It's you." He reached for her, but she twisted out of his range, teasing, swaying

her hips. As she moved closer, he grabbed at her. She laughed and shied away.

Truth be told, she...he shook his head. What a fool he was. "That's it."

Sofia stopped in front of him. "What's the matter, Bubba? Now you don't love me anymore?"

"No, my beauty! I still love you alright." He grabbed a handful of her thick hair and pulled her in then kissed her hard. "I'll be right back. Keep your dancing shoes on."

She frowned and looked at her bare feet. "What?"

"Nevermind." He kissed her again then hurried upstairs. After two unanswered knocks, he pushed the old man's door open. "I figured it out."

Bull looked up. "What exactly did you conclude?"

Braxton smiled, held a finger up, then grabbed the piece of paper then marked his father's place in the Meriwether novel he'd been reading.

"What are you doing?"

"Just a minute, and you'll see." Once he found the ink and quill, he scribbled the words that would change everything. He handed the note to his father. "Think you can get this under Gwen's pillow while the Buckmeyers are supping tonight?"

Bull read the message. "You really think this is going to work?"

"She came to New Orleans, didn't she?"

"Add a 'come alone' and..." He smiled so big, the gesture threatened to break his face in two. "I'll take it myself if I have to."

Chapter Twenty



“But Daddy.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve gone everywhere I can think of. Yet, other than that one clerk at the post office, no one has ever seen or heard of a Braxton Hightower.”

Gwen looked from her pigheaded father to Mama May, who offered not one smidgeon of encouragement, then back to her daddy. “Can we at least go to the Hightower Plantation? We’re so close.”

“It’s fifteen miles downriver, sugar, and if they have a Braxton there, someone here would know of him.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. That was the bizarre part. Why would he tell her an out and out lie? She glared at her father. “I’ve got to find him. I’ve got to know.”

“If...” He held one finger up. “We take you tomorrow to the Hightower’s place, and they don’t know him from Adam’s off ox, then we go home, agreed?”

No. She did not want to leave, not until she found him. If only she could think of some explanation...maybe it might give her an idea. She strolled to the balcony’s double doors and pulled back the lace curtains.

How could this be happening to her? Other than searching grave markers for his name, she couldn’t think of anything else.

Except the folks of New Orleans didn’t bury their dead. They put them in above-ground crypts. A shudder took control of her spine thinking of it.

She turned around. “Fine, if they don’t know where he is, then we’ll go home. But I would think that you wouldn’t have come all this way to give up and leave without at least knowing the truth. I might think it of someone else, a lesser man, but not Henry Buckmeyer. You never give up. You just hate the man I love. But I’ll go.”

“I believe I know the truth, and have for a while. Maybe after tomorrow, you’ll accept it, too.”

Mama May jumped to her feet and rubbed her hands together. “Good! Now that’s settled, let’s go get supper. We still have time before the curtain goes up.”

Whoever heard of baked fish? Gwen regretted ordering the perch, but had tired of the spicy Cajun dishes. Everyone knew fish should be

fried and served with potato salad.

And that wonderful sauce Miss Jewel made. She only picked at the fish, filling up on the buttered, steamed vegetables and the wonderful fresh baked bread.

It wasn't fair he made her promise to leave. What if Braxton lay in some hovel—right down the street—so close, dying of the fever?

Of all the plays for the Shakespeare troupe to perform, it had to be Romeo and Juliet. As though she needed any reminder that she and her Romeo might never be together.

Even if she found him, would her father ever consider letting her marry him? On the way back to the hotel, she ran the predicament through her mind for the thousandth time.

All the letters... She fingered her locket. And gifts... They had a New Orleans stamp plain as day. It just didn't make any sense.

"Don't forget the chair."

What? Did he think she was twelve? "Yes, Daddy, I won't. Good night." She leaned out and looked past him. "You, too, Mama. Sleep well."

Once the oil lamps glowed, and she changed from her new evening attire into her gown and robe, a black square on her pillow caught her eye. What...? She picked it up. Licorice. Her heartbeat quickened. Braxton's favorite.

But how... Had he been there? Was it a message? What could it mean?

She laid the candy onto her tongue, then closed her mouth and eyes, savoring the burst of flavor, remembering the time Braxton had bought some in Clarksville to surprise her. He made her close her eyes and open her mouth.

His smile and laugh when she opened them again.... How much she'd enjoyed the treat.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

Twirling down onto the bed, she grabbed the pillow and hugged it.

Oh, my love, where are you?

The thought to pray passed over her heart, but God probably was on her father's side.

Closing her eyes again, she savored the last little bit of licorice. Would he ever hold her in his arms? She flung the sack of feathers back onto the bed. A piece of paper fluttered as the pillow sailed over it. She grabbed it and held it by the lamp.

Gwendolyn, my love,

*Meet me in the lobby at the stroke of midnight, I'll
explain it all, please come alone.*

*All my Love,
Braxton*

Her heart boomed in her ears. Her breath caught. He was alive! He would explain everything! She threw off her robe. What time was it? She rummaged through her trunk. What to wear?

Oh, Braxton! You're alive, and you're real. Yes, I will come alone.

She decided for time's sake to wear the dress she'd worn earlier and ducked into it.

And when I've heard all your answers to all my questions, I'll wake up Daddy and Mama May, and we'll explain it all to them. Together.

He was real, she knew he was.

And if she was any happier, she'd surely explode.



Blue Dog licked Henry's hand, not a good sign. For too long, he studied the night. Blue growled. Then as if the beasts wanted him to know, a piercing howl broke the calm. Wolves!

He sat up in bed. Moonlight shown through lacy curtains.

Where was he?

Oh, yes. New Orleans. Why had he dreamed of that night with Sue on the Jefferson Trace? The night they all might have all been killed if not for Blue Dog. He snuggled in tight against May, with a smile on his lips. What a great dog. He loved New Blue, but there'd never be another like his sire.

Could it have been him going by the very spot where he proposed to his first love? His new loved rolled over. "Henry? Is something wrong?"

"Just a bad dream. I'll tell you about in the morning."

She nodded then laid back. "I love you, darling."

"I love you, too, baby."



Gwen stepped off the stairs then searched the two-story room. If the big clock behind the clerk's desk proved right, then still ten minutes to go. The lobby appeared so different, so quiet without any of its usual hustle bustle.

No one anywhere to be seen. A low hum drifted from the lobby's far end. Sounded like a few folks remained in the bar.

Was that where he was now? Waiting for midnight? Waiting for

her?

She shouldn't be there.

Her heart pounded.

Sticking her hand into her clutch, she touched the Derringer Levi and Rose had given her for her sixteenth birthday. It's cool steel brought a measure of peace. She appreciated that her daddy insisted she bring it.

Her feet threatened to bolt back upstairs, into her room with the chair back in its place, leveraged against the door.

But her heart nailed them to the floor.

An overstuffed chair against the wall to her right seemed like an excellent place to wait. She slipped into it and leaned back, but kept her hand in her clutch wrapped around the pistol.

The clock chimed once then twice. She stood, staring at the bar. A blur to her left pulled her around. Braxton hurried toward her. She swallowed, dropped her purse in the chair, and ran to him.

At the last step, he stopped and held his arms wide open. She threw herself into his embrace. He spun her around then pressed his lips against hers.

For a heartbeat she resisted, then kissed him back.

The clock's stroke sounded. She kissed him one last time then leaned back. "Where have you been, darling? We've been searching all over for you."

He nodded then leaned in. She put her hand on his chest. "Your note said –"

"Yes, I wrote it, remember? I know what it says. Want a drink?"

"No, of course not! I only want you to tell me where you have been. Why doesn't anyone in this city know you?"

"Oh, they know me, but I lied to you."

She backed away a step. "What? Why? When?"

"My precious, I never meant to fall in love with you, but I did. I did my best to stay away, forget about you. Tried to stop writing, but I couldn't. I love you, Gwendolyn."

She backed away another step. "What did you lie about?"

"My name. Hightower is, was, my mother's maiden name." He moved in closer and shrugged. "My father...he sent me to try and purchase some of your father's land."

"Why? This isn't making any sense at all, Braxton." Her mind spun with possibilities, the deception. Her daddy hated liars. "But that's not your real name, is it? You're not Braxton Hightower. That's why no one knows you!"

He reached for her, but she quickly turned her shoulder away.

"Who are you?" Her voice echoed in the cavernous, empty room. "Tell me! Tell me now!"

“My real name...is Glover.”

At first, the name didn't register, meant nothing to her. Then like that snowball Houston landed to her temple, it hit her. “As in Bull Glover?”

“Yes, darling. He's my father.”

“But why would he send you to buy our land? Why did you have to lie?”

“Because he's a mean, bitter old man obsessed with beating Henry at anything, putting him down. He figured he could rub it in your father's face, if he was a neighbor.”

A rose by any other name...but it wasn't sweet...and this...this information certainly was not a rose. More like thorns, pricking her heart. She couldn't believe it.

Her daddy had been right—again. It was all about him after all, and vengeance. The pain in her chest heightened. After a deep, full breath, she exhaled slowly.

“Why didn't you just tell me?”

“I couldn't stand the thought of losing you.” He held his hand out. “Come on, I've got a priest waiting. There's nothing more in this world I want but to make you my wife. I'll make it up to you, my love, and never lie to you again. I've been so torn, my heart shattered, beside myself with fear. Will you put me back together? Heal my aching heart? Be my wife?”

“I...I....”

“We can be married tonight, tell your folks in the morning.”

She was of age. And here was the man she loved, but he lied to her. Her Father's words rang loud in her head. If a man will lie to you, he'll steal from you. Was that it? Was he after her money?

Did she really love Braxton—or whatever his name was? “Let's wake Daddy up. He'll understand. But I cannot marry without his blessing.”

“No, he'll never give it—not to me—not a Glover. He's hated my father forever. I'm sure you don't know the real story about that first fight. He ever told you about Tess?” He reached for her again.

She backed away another step. “It doesn't matter. If you love me like you say, you'll talk to him. I can't just run off. Mary Rachel did that, and it about broke his heart.”

“What about mine? And yours? He'll get over it, especially when he sees how much we love each other.”

Would he?

It was her life, and....

Movement over his shoulder pulled her eyes from Braxton's. A woman. The same woman from the café. The one staring. She strolled toward her, glaring the same as before. Gwen looked back to... “Who

is that?”

Braxton spun then slowly turned back. “Sofia is her name. She’s my father’s slave.”

The look on his face—on Sofia’s—told it all. Gwen backed away a step then turned and ran up the stairs, taking some two at a time.

Footfalls fell behind her, but she didn’t look back.

Chapter Twenty-one



Blue Dog slobbered all over his hand. Henry swatted at him. The pack's howls turned to menacing growls.

For a heartbeat, he didn't move—just lay there—then it all made sense. He jumped out of bed, threw on yesterday's shirt and trousers, grabbed his Patterson, and ran out the door.

Gwen raced toward him. Braxton on her heels. The girl from the café right behind him. Henry raised the pistol. "Stop! Best turn around, son, or I'll blow your head off."

Hightower halted, while Gwen ran on. He held his off hand out, and she ran into his embrace. A door behind him opened, but he didn't take his eyes off the young man. The cafe girl joined him.

"I'll not tell you again, son. Get gone. You're done here."

"But sir..." He held his hand out. "Tell him, Gwen. Tell him we love each other."

She kept her face buried in Henry's chest, but shook her head no. Braxton eased closer, softened his tone. "Tell him."

Henry cocked the Patterson. A shot over Hightower's head should get him gone, but then what? He'd wake the whole hotel. May joined him. "Don't shoot him, Henry. He isn't worth it."

He let his wife take Gwen, un-cocked the pistol and handed it to May, then stepped toward the younger man. "She's right. You're not worth the bullet." He balled both fists.

The beauty at the impostor's side tugged his sleeve. "Come on, Bubba. Let's go home."

Henry took another step.

Braxton shrugged, then waved him off like none of it was worth any effort. He spit on the floor then wrapped his arm around the girl, and strolled off like the whole thing had been nothing to ever mention again.



Gwen pressed her face into May's shoulder. Why had she believed Braxton over her Daddy? She should have known better. The chowderhead didn't love her. He loved that slave. That much was clear, and she loved him. No wonder the girl had glared at her so.

The door opened, but she didn't look up. Oh Lord, what a fool she'd been. Salty tears stung her eyes and wet Mama's housecoat, but she couldn't stop. She hated herself for being such a crybaby.

A daddy-sized hand patted her shoulder. "Did he...uh...hurt you, baby? In...uh...anyway?"

She shook her head.

Mama May snuggled her in tighter. "Did he say where he's been?"

She nodded, but didn't trust her voice.

"Want anything, baby? Water? Whatever? Anything...I'll go get it."

She sniffed and breathed in deep, filling her lungs, then remembered who she was. Henry and Sue's grown daughter, not some crybaby school girl. She pushed away from May. Sat up on the bed. Smoothed out her dress.

But a horrible thought washed over her. She faced her father.

"Daddy! I left my clutch on the chair right next to the wall. My Derringer is in it, the one Levi and Rose gave me."

"I'll be right back." He picked his pistol up from the side table where May had put it. "Lock the door behind me."

She nodded and complied as soon as he was out it, then propped a chair under the knob before turning around. "Sweetheart, if he took advantage...there's a tea we can get."

"No. Oh thank God, no." Gwen closed her eyes. How close had she come to going with him? "He said he had a priest standing by to marry us tonight. Said we'd tell you and Daddy about it in the morning." A single tear escaped. She wiped it away. The idiot wasn't worth any more tears.

"I'm so sorry, but at least now you know the truth."

She studied her hands. Yes, she did know. She looked up. "Mama, how will I know? If I was so wrong about Braxton, how will I ever know if I really love someone?"

May grinned. "You have no idea how many times I asked myself the same question. I lost track of the number of marriage proposals I've had over the years."

"Really? That many."

She nodded. "At first, I thought I loved your father. I mean... what's not to love? But now it's like we've become one person. The feelings I have for that man are so much stronger and deeper than any I could ever have imagined."

"If only...."

"There's no more thinking. I know for sure and certain that I love him, and he loves me." She grinned. "He wanted to shoot Braxton something terrible, but he didn't, because I asked him not to. Now that's love."

"I wanted him to shoot him dead, too. But praise God, he didn't."
"Amen."

Gwen stood then walked to the double doors that led to the balcony and stared out for a few beats of her heart. "His real name isn't Hightower, it's Glover."

"What? Like Bull Glover?"

With great sorrow, she admitted the truth. "He's his son. That's why no one ever heard of him."

"What? Gwendolyn Belle!" May whirled her around. Gwen had never heard her use that tone before. "Oh, precious Lord! What have you done, girl!"

"What, Mama? What's wrong? What are you talking about?"

"Your father!" She rushed toward the door then threw the chair under the knob across the room. "I can't believe you let him go without knowing that! What's wrong with you?" She headed out the door then ran back in to get her handbag.

Gwen could only stare at the wild woman in disbelief. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"You sent him off not knowing that! It's probably a trap! How could you?" She checked the chamber of her Derringer and ran out again. Her face puckered in such anger. "What if you've sent him into an ambush?"

What her stepmother meant—why she was in such a rage, hit Gwendolyn like a cannon ball and instantly sickened her.

No, God! Please no!

If anything happened to Daddy because of her... She ran after May, praying every step she took.

At the top of the stairs, she stopped. Her mother was wrapped in her father's embrace, leaning against the banister halfway up the grand staircase.

Every cell in her body tingled. She could not catch her breath though the distance she'd run wasn't that far. Her heart beat wildly.

Praise You, Lord. Thank You. Oh, thank you and bless You!

Her knees wobbled. She turned and started back to the room, needing to sit down. They followed shortly. Once inside, and the door closed, he extended the clutch toward her.

"Still right there where you said." He turned to May. "What happened up here to upset you so, sweetheart?"

Bursting into tears, Gwendolyn stared at her hands resting in her lap. What if.... "It was all my fault. I should have... Mama was right." She looked up at him, but could only see his form through her blurred vision. Still she ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Daddy! I'm so sorry. If anything had happened to you...."

"To me? What did you think was going to happen?"

She just sobbed into his chest, clinging to him.

“May, what’s this all about?”

“Right after you left to fetch her gun, she told me Braxton was Bull Glover’s son. All I could think of was you walking into an ambush.”

Pushing back, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “Oh, Daddy. I’m so sorry. I should have told you.”

“Now, now. Calm down, the both of you. I’m fine. No ambush.”

Fidgeting with the buttons on the front of her gown, Mama fell into the chair next to the little table. “I obviously overreacted. Please forgive me, both of you. I’m so sorry, Gwendolyn, for the way I spoke...to...you.”

Barely able to get the sentence out, she covered her face and sobbed.

Her father left her side and went to May’s, kneeling in front of her. “Here, here. I’m fine, my love. No need for tears. All is well and we know the truth.” He faced Gwen. “So Braxton admitted he was Bull’s son?”

“Yes, sir. He came to Texas hoping to buy some of our land, so Bull could rub it in your face. Him being our neighbor and all, but then Braxton claimed he fell in love with me.”

“Oh, baby.” May looked up with red eyes. “Don’t believe it. When your father wouldn’t sell any of our land, they set their sights on you just to get to your father.” A knock silenced her. May rose and walked to it. “Yes?”

“Ma’am? Is everything alright? It’s the manager. I heard there was a disturbance. Are you in need of any service?”

“No, sir. All is well. Thank you for the concern.”

“Yes, ma’am. Let us know if you need anything.”

“I’m so sorry, Daddy.” She met May’s eyes. “And you, too, Mama. For everything. Will you forgive me?”

“Of course.” He held his arms out and she walked into his embrace. Too soon though, he eased her back. “Let’s make it through this night, and get ourselves back to Texas. Where’s your room key?”

She pulled it from her clutch. “Right here.”

He held his hand out. “You stay here with your mother. I’ll be right across the hall.”

“I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“Best we be on our guard. You two get some sleep if you can.”

But the bliss of slumber eluded Gwen. After May dozed off, she relived Braxton’s kiss. It had been wonderful...and shameful...and so exhilarating...and dreadful. When she thought it to be a true kiss.

Her first kiss...based on lies and deception. She could never take it back, have another first kiss.

Deep into the night, she pondered on exactly how close she'd come to eloping with him. In the end, she concluded if she had, then she'd be a widow, and her daddy would be behind bars for murder.

Somehow, she slipped into a fitful dozy dream world, where she'd indeed married Braxton but was not a widow. Her father, jailed for killing Bull Glover, languished behind bars, and her pregnant mother cried nonstop.

The lawmen moved Daddy to the town gallows. The judge's gavel struck his desk, the boom louder than any thunderclap.

The executioner pulled the trapdoor's lever.

In slow motion, Henry Buckmeyer fell through the hole. She screamed no. Her arms reached for him.

Had to keep the rope from tightening around his neck. She couldn't. She raced down the stairs and under it to hold him up, but he thrashed. Suddenly mired in the muddy hole, she found herself being sucked down.

From the edge, Braxton stood ten feet tall, glowering over her. A wicked grin marred his face. "Your share belongs to me now, and I've got all of the Bull's money, too. It's mine! All mine!"

The slave girl slithered from behind him, her limbs like snakes, glided and slid all around him, over him. She beamed.

"And mine, darling." She cackled and glared at Gwen. "He set me free. That's right. I'm a free woman now, and your husband loves only me."

"No! Daddy!" She reached toward Braxton, sinking deeper. "Save me."

The creamy-chocolate-colored beauty chortled. "Save you? Ha! It's all worked out just like we figured, honey pie. Thank you kindly for being so stupid."

"Help me!"

Just as the mud reached her chin, a hand rocked her shoulder. "Wake up, baby."

She gasped and grabbed at the voice. "Help him."

"Wake up, Gwen."

She forced her eyes open then held the hug a few frantic heartbeats longer. Finally calmed, she leaned back. "Oh, Mama, it was horrible."

"I figured so by the way you hollered."

She scooted up in bed. "Instead of Daddy shooting Braxton, he killed Bull, and they were going to hang him, and I married..."

Oh, mercy, it was terrible." She grimaced. "That slave girl mocked me, and I was getting sucked down into a mud hole under Daddy's gallows. I couldn't save him. Braxton laughed at me."

A knock stopped the nightmare's retelling.

Mama May scooted off the bed and hurried to the door. "Yes?"

"I heard a scream. Everyone fine?"

She looked back. Gwen pulled the covers up higher, then May opened the door. "Morning, love."

"What happened? Who called for help?"

"It was me, Daddy. I had a bad dream."

"Oh. Well...you're awake now. You ladies get dressed, and I'll have them bring us some breakfast."

Not soon enough, she found herself on the third deck of The Mississippi Queen, watching New Orleans grow smaller with each turn of the steamer's giant paddle wheel. Never again would she be so foolish. She'd... Oh, no!

What had she done?

She raced to find her daddy.



Henry leaned against the bedroom's wall as May unpacked. She glanced over. "What are you grinning about?"

Giving his mirth voice, he chuckled. "Oh, over what a wonderful woman I married. You ready to shoot Bull or Braxton or whoever had me."

Her brows arched, and she wagged a finger in his direction. "What did you think I'd do but come save you?"

With arms opened wide, he beckoned her, and she hurried to him. Wrapping her against himself, he relished her softness and kissed her neck. "You get any rest last night?"

She scrunched her shoulder and giggled. "Some, but I could use a nap."

"Me, too." He kissed her for real. "I'd love nothing better."

"Daddy? Daddy! You in there?"

Never from the moment of his beautiful daughter's birth had the temptation not to answer her call for help been any stronger, but he pecked May's cheek and turned. "Yes, baby." He stepped over and unlocked the door. "Hey, sweetie, something wrong?"

"Did you post that letter to Clay?"

"Yes. I did. Just like you asked."



"Oh, Daddy! Why did you?" Gwen backed up a step. What was she going to do now? Clay would hate her, and...she glared at him. "I'm going to be an old maid."

“No, baby.” He stepped toward her with his arms out, but she turned away, stared out the window. She didn’t want to be consoled. Her life was ruined.

May stepped in front of her father. “What’s wrong? What did your letter say?” Then as though the travesty dawned on her, she frowned. “Oh....”

“Oh what?”

Her father was so clueless. Gwendolyn shook her head. Why, oh, why had she ever sent it? If she didn’t give it voice, then maybe her beau-less predicament wouldn’t be real. Nothing of what had happened seemed real.

Last night’s nightmare was more tangible than everything that had gone on. Yet there her daddy stood.

Joining May, he took his love’s hand.

Shoulder to shoulder, they were the perfect couple. Just as she’d imagined herself with that cad she’d thought—so wrongly—was her prince. Would she ever have one? She remembered Braxton’s face when he’d proposed...the kiss.

How could he be so cruel? She reached up and yanked the locket from her neck and flung it across the room.

“Ooooo! I hate that liar! And now...and now...everything is ruined!”

“What was in the letter, Gwendolyn?” His tone told it all. At least he didn’t include her middle name. But then he usually reserved that for when she’d really crossed the line.

“You can’t guess?” Her eyes filled with more stupid tears. Where they came from, she couldn’t imagine because she thought she’d cried them all. “I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to sound so mean. I told him I was going to marry Braxton, and that he might as well stay in California.”

“Write him another letter. Tell him it was a mistake.”

“Oh, Mama, and say what? That I want him now?” She shook her head. “He’s a catch. He’ll find himself a nice girl in San Francisco, and I’ll never see him again.”

“Write him again and tell him I forbade the union.”

Stepping closer, May held her arms out. “Sweetheart, I’m so sorry, but we can fix this. If he loves you as he says, he won’t let the letter change anything. We can write Mary Rachel. Maybe she can still intercept yours.”

“But it’s already been over a week. He’s going to hate me.”

Like a real mother, May tucked a stray curl behind Gwen’s ear. “Perhaps, if we explain to your sister, tell her what happened, she can encourage Clay to come home...” She looked to her husband. “He can court her, right?”

“Wasn’t that what he was doing before he ran off?”



The rage had cooled, but Bull Glover still had half a mind to sell Sofia, and put the money on.... That was it! He stood and strolled to the shelf where he kept May's novels and retrieved her second one written after she arrived in Texas.

He flipped through it until he found the passage he'd just remembered.

What an idiot he was.

Why hadn't he seen this before? He put the book back then eased down to Bubba's room and opened the door without bothering to knock. His son's lazy wench still lay in bed. He ought to sell her for sure. She pulled the covers up to her neck.

Humph, but not until...

"Bubba's gone to the warehouse."

"Well, get your slothful-self out of that bed and go get him."

"Yes, sir."

Not soon enough, his only son, leastwise the only one he claimed, darkened his door. "Sofia said you wanted me?"

"Well, guess she is good for something. I want you to go to the swamp tonight."

"What for? I don't have any money."

"There's an hombre there deals Faro at the Horse Shoe, Harmino, if I'm remembering right, but you can't miss him. Got a chin to ear scar. Tell him to come see me. I've got a proposition for him."

"What's this all about?"

Why did the boy always want him to explain himself? "Bring him back, and you can find out same time he does. If you'd read May Meriwether's Ranger novel, then you'd know exactly what I've got in mind." He waved the boy off. "Get out."

Shame he didn't put this together sooner. But Patrick Henry Buckmeyer would get his comeuppance, if it was the last thing Bull did.

Chapter Twenty-two



The evening of the second day up the big muddy, Henry stood at the third deck railing and stared at the frothy whitecaps the big wheel churned.

Being back in New Orleans and seeing that Sofia girl dredged up so many old memories. She had to be related, daughter or granddaughter, a niece at the least, but who kept good records on slaves?

Had Glover really bought Tess? Was the girl Bull's flesh and blood? And if so, did Braxton know she was related?

Mercy, if only Levi hadn't stopped him the last time he fought Bull...but then he'd be in jail or worse. May would have gone back to New York.

For too many turns of the paddle wheel, he ran all the permutations of going back and taking care of Bull for once and all, but every scenario led back to the Word.

Beside murder being on the top ten list, vengeance belonged to the Lord. God would repay Glover for his actions—unless some miracle happened and the man repented and got a new heart.

What Henry needed to do was pray for his old comrade in arms, forgive him. He sure didn't want to, but he knelt right there and sought his Creator.



Gwendolyn reread her letter then looked up. May still worked on hers. Again Braxton's words, the ones she'd managed to hold in, charged to the tip of her tongue. Her mother—that's what she was and what Gwen wanted her to be—set her quill down and held up her last draft, waving it in the air.

"Let me see yours."

"Sure, but...uh..." She pursed her lips. Why couldn't she keep anything to herself? Now May would know something was wrong. The look in her eyes told it all. Best go ahead and ask her if she knew. "Has daddy ever mentioned Tess?"

"No. Who's that?"

She looked away then shook her head. "Maybe we should consider

the source, but Braxton said this Tess person was the real reason for that first fight between Daddy and Bull.”

“Hmmm. Perhaps we should...your father told me he’d embarrassed Glover over....” The older woman’s cheeks flushed.

“Over what?”

She leaned in, whispered in Gwen’s ear, then leaned back and shrugged. “He didn’t elaborate any more than that. And quite frankly, I didn’t want him to.”

Gwen had never heard of such a thing, but then other than the basics of sex—she shuddered inside remembering that awkward afternoon, Rebecca explaining the ways of men and women—she never heard more, so she didn’t know a lot.

“So does this happen to a lot of men?”

May laughed then shrugged. “Don’t know, sweetie, not to your daddy, and he’s the only man I’ve had any experience with.”

“Oooo, don’t! Please no.”

Her mother grinned and turned an even deeper shade of red.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

Gwen wanted to hear more, but not about May and her father. “It’ll be just fine with me if we don’t get so personal.”

“I apologize.”

“I mean, I like y’all holding hands and kissing and hugging, but....” Of course, she knew...there was Crockett—and the new one on the way and, but.... “So, what are you going to name the baby?”



May did not have any right. Wasn’t like she didn’t have a past, except she never succumbed to.... What? Surely there was nothing to it; at least not all that much. But why hadn’t he ever said anything?

All afternoon she’d put on a happy face, but knowing her husband harbored a deep dark secret love would have soured her milk if she was still nursing.

Oh, Crockett, will you even remember Mommy when she gets home?

Over dessert—that she needed like one more crazy scenario of Tess in her brain, but ate anyway—they laughed, but she brooded. Well, she was eating for two again after all, except she still carried the extra pounds she’d put on with her firstborn.

Bless the Lord, that Henry liked the extra softness. Or so he said.

Again, her dearest warned his daughter to prop a chair under the knob, then finally she had him all to herself. He closed and locked the door after her. When he turned back, a concerned expression etched little lines around his eyes.

“What’s wrong, dear?”

Mercy, Lord. Could it be that Braxton had just thrown out a name?

“You know me so well.” She tried to offer a smile, but feared she failed to deliver adequately. “I didn’t mean to... I mean it’s probably nothing, but I... It isn’t that....”

He took her shoulders in his hands and held her eyes with his. She loved the depth of their sky blue. “Darling. What is it?”

“This afternoon, while we were working on the letters...well...” She should forget it. How many years ago had it been? A lifetime to be certain. “You were what? Sixteen when you joined Jackson’s army?”

His laughter boomed in the quietness of the moment. “Yes, but Old Hickory? What’s this all about, sweetheart? A couple of times over supper, I thought you might slap me. I know for a fact it’s not your time of month, unless....”

Horror twisted his face.

“No, no, my love. The baby’s fine. It’s something Gwen said. Evidently, Braxton told her...” She grinned again, or tried. “Can you tell this is circumstantial hearsay at best?” She filled her lungs.

It had nothing to do with her; she didn’t even know him then. Why, she’d only been six and still the apple of the Commodore’s eye. “Spit it out, May. What’s got you going in circles?”

“Tess. Gwen mentioned that Braxton claimed you hated Bull over someone named Tess.”

He filled his lungs then plopped down in the nearest chair and sighed. “So every one of my sins has found me out. Sue never even knew about Tess. Didn’t figure there was any reason....”

May folded her arms over her chest, but her heart still hurt. She’d come to grips with Sue, but now a whole new past love would haunt her, one he’d kept so private he hadn’t even told his first wife. “So what’s the story?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Are you still in love with her? Is that why you don’t want to talk about her?”

“Heavens, no. I love you, baby.”

“I know that. It’s just.... Fine. Then tell me about her. I was under the misguided impression that there were no secrets between us.”

“And there aren’t. Tess isn’t a secret. She’s only someone from my past.” He nodded toward the chair across from him and extended his hand toward her. “Mercy. Sit down, and I’ll tell you all about her.”

She did, then leaned forward, took his hand and intertwined her fingers with his.

“I’d been with the army for a while. The British had landed, but

our spies told us they were waiting on reinforcements. Once he was happy with the breastworks we'd dug, Jackson gave a few at a time a day off in town; mine fell on a Sunday." He shook his head.

"What?" She squeezed his hand.

"Oh, I used to think of it as fate. Know better now. Nothing happens by chance."

She squeezed a little harder and rubbed the top of his hand with her thumb. She loved his strong hands. "So what did you think was fate?" She met his eyes. "Or should I say destiny?"

"Getting a Sunday off for one thing. Any other day, she wouldn't have been there."

"She, being Tess?"

"Yes, ma'am. That day, I was on my way home, but her singing drew me to Congo Square. The rhythm of the drums sounded first, then a velvet alto caught my ear." He grinned his crooked little boy smile like he was ashamed of the memory. "You ever been there on a Sunday?"

"Oh no, not me. Chester talked about it some, but Sundays were for resting up."

"Guess I stood out. Not long before she noticed me, and...." He shrugged. "I'd never had anyone sing to me before. I didn't realize she was a slave. Didn't understand how different it was here from Kentucky."

"What are you talking about?"

"Them getting Sunday afternoons off. I didn't know about that."

"Chester knew. That was the only thing about New Orleans he liked."

"Anyway, that evening before we both went back to where we belonged...." Henry lowered his chin. "Couldn't tell you how many times I've relived that day." He looked up and grinned again. "If I could, I'd change my past, but I can't, and well... Bull found out about her. And me professing my love, being so naïve over the girl. Then to make it worse, he hunted down her master and made a deal to buy her."

"So you lied to me?"

"No, when?"

"You told me that the feud between you two was over you shooting your mouth off regarding Bull's trouble with the ladies, that that's why he wanted to fight."

"I didn't lie. He'd been riding me hard, bragging over owning her someday, then I found out...." A chuckle escaped, and he shook his head. "Your father's the one who told me about Glover's problem."

"Really? How interesting."

"When it was Glover teasing me, everything was fine, but once

Silas gave me the goods to give it back, things changed. Of course, I rubbed in it.”

She leaned back a bit but kept ahold of his hand. “Was she pretty?”

“Oh yes, but couldn’t hold a candle to you.”

“And you’re sure you haven’t been in love with her all these years?”

“Absolutely. I never loved her. What Tess stirred in me...well, I’d call it more akin to lust. I thought it was the real thing, but...” He patted her hand. “At sixteen...it being the first—and only—time with her.... After I got out of the army, Mother and I left New Orleans. Never tried to find her.”

“Why not?”

“No money, plus I knew Mother would not take kindly to me wanting to buy a slave, pretty or not.”

He said all the right things. How stupid for getting all green-eyed over a slave girl. “What did she look like?” Why had she said such a thing?

“A lot like that Sofie girl. Thought for a split second, it was her. You’d think Glover would have kept his son away from his daughter.”

How horrid a man Bull Glover must be. A wave of nausea rolled over her just thinking about it. “Bless God, Henry, that Gwen didn’t run off and get mixed up with the likes of Braxton.”

“Amen. But I’d have killed him and his daddy. Only takes one to hang a jury.”

She tugged on his hand, and he came out of his chair, then pulled her to her feet. She kissed him then leaned back, his arms held her tight. “I would have beat you to it. Nobody messes with us Buckmeyers.”



On the way to Jefferson, Gwen reworked her letter to Clay until Mama declared it perfect, then once her mother’s note to Mary Rachel explaining the misadventure in New Orleans and what a mistake her sister’s first letter to Mister Briggs had been, Gwen relaxed some.

The very morning she landed in Jefferson, she and Mama May insisted on a trip to the post office, post haste, over her daddy’s protest.

Then, it was in God’s hands. And He was merciful.

The stage ride home proved almost pleasant. Surely, it would all work out. Her sister would convince Clay to forget that first letter. He’d come in the spring with Elijah, and everything would be peaches

and honey.

That scenario worked until the wee hours of the first night home. The enormity of her sins robbed her of sleep and gnawed at her sanity.

Though she certainly shouldn't, she lit a lamp and reread the letter Clay had sent. Several times. With each profession of love, the whirlpool in her gut worsened. With each line her eyes scrutinized, the conviction of his pending pain stabbed her heart.

Poor Clay. He would be crushed. Why had she done it?

If only old man Broomfield hadn't died right when he did. He would have seen Mary Rachel's letter wasn't for him. Gwendolyn might never have gone to New Orleans if she'd only known how Clay really felt.

Convinced he didn't care, she'd chosen her medicine. But she hadn't known then what a lying toad...would she have chosen the weasel and gone anyway?

So easily deceived!

Each day that dragged by, seemed the weight on her shoulders grew heavier. By her calculations, on the morning it should have arrived, nothing happened. Nothing felt different. If he had, she would have sensed it.

But nothing was different, not one little thing.

Maybe Clay worked at the gold mine. And Mary still had it. That could be good. Give her sister plenty of time to figure out how to make him understand. If he had it, she'd have to know it in her heart. She was sure of it.

The letter had to be sitting on Mary Rachel's desk, the one she put off to the side of the big picture window in the front corner of the Lone Star Mercantile.

Gwen giggled. That was it. Clay and Elijah were off mining gold, and her second letter would get there before he read the first one. That had to be it. She skipped downstairs. Why had she been so melancholy?

The good Lord watched over her, always had. But down deep, a nagging dark cloud screamed no.

Had she doomed herself to a life of spinsterhood?

Chapter Twenty-three



Of course, Clay knew nothing of Gwen's calculations.

Though just like she figured, he'd been up on the mountain hard rock mining. However, the young miss failed to factor in such favorable trade winds.

They'd trimmed a whole day off the steamer's trip up California's coast. Nor could she be aware that Mister Briggs had drawn the short straw the day before.

At that very moment, Clay backed the mine's empty wagon up to the Lone Star Mercantile's loading dock with a list of supplies and a ten-page letter that needed posting. He found the lady he hoped that one day would be his sister-in-law sitting at her desk.

"Hey, Mary Rachel."

The beautiful young woman looked up. "Well, hey yourself. When did you get here?"

"Just now." He handed over the list and his folded pages. "Can you post this to Gwendolyn for me?"

Taking his offering, she gave him a little nod. "Pleased to, and you my friend, are living right. Just this morning, we picked up the mail, and you've got two letters." She pulled out her middle drawer then handed them over.

The first bore his love's swirly lettering. He'd know it anywhere, just like he knew his brother's hen scratching. He stuffed Gwen's in his shirt pocket and tore open Jake's.

November 14, 1853

Clay,

Pa took sick. His cough's turned real bad. If you want to see him before he goes on to his reward, best get home. Everybody else is fine. Well Ma is heartsick. We're not sure if she cries over you or Pa most. And this ain't no lie she cooked up to get you back Doc says if Pa makes the winter, it'll be a miracle. You do what you think right, but were it me, I'd get on home. You ain't just Ma's baby boy. Might do the old man some good to see your snot nosed face.

*Your brother,
Jake*

Clay handed the single page to Mary Rachel. "What do you think? It takes a month to get a letter here, right?"

"Yes, about that." She took the paper, stared at it barely a minute, then looked up. "I'm so sorry, Clay. The same steamer that brought this sails day after tomorrow. Might even be one quicker. Want me to check?"

He closed his eyes. If only he knew for sure his father would still be alive. "What do you think?"

"If it was Henry Buckmeyer, I'd leave as soon as possible."

"What about Elijah? He still at the farm?"

"He is. Want me to send word?"

"Please. And is Jethro at the bank?"

"Last I knew. You go on. I'll get Hank to go fetch Elijah." She stood. "And don't worry about getting anything back up the mountain. Amos can deliver the supplies."

Smack dab in the middle of his confab with Jethro and Mister Risen, Clay remembered the letter from Gwendolyn still stuffed in his shirt pocket. On purpose, he waited until he was in his room at Jethro and Mary Rachel's house to read it.

Instead of enjoying her sweet consoling words of love, he couldn't believe his eyes.

The news finally sunk in the third time he reread her words.

Gwendolyn was marrying Braxton, and he might as well stay in California. The pain tore his heart then ripped it into little shreds. He blinked backed the tears, but they wouldn't be denied.

Someone wailed. It was him. For the longest, he cried like the baby his brothers always claimed he was. But it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered if his one true love married that dandy, Braxton.

How did the likes of that sorry excuse of a human being ever weasel his way into her best graces? Well, she could have him. He hated them both. Hated himself for leaving Texas and coming to San Francisco.

Now, he'd lost his pa and his love.



Once word reached Elijah about Mister Briggs taking to his deathbed, he alternated between praying and debating with himself if he should go with his friend. Bless the young man's heart.

But by the time he reached the Risen's place, he'd decided to stay. Absence for sure made his heart grow fonder.

But he'd given Henry his word, and only holding Cecelia's hand until married as he'd promised seemed more than he could stand.

The desire to smother her lovely face with kisses had grown so strong, he really didn't know if he could bear being there any extra time prior to the wedding.

Oh, what a glorious day that would be. He grinned. And an even grander night.

He found Mary and Jethro in the kitchen, helping Francie cook supper. Did his heart good to see the little family together, but it also reminded him that his own Buckmeyer sister was so far away. "Hey, is Clay here?"

His partner threw a nod upstairs. "Best go check on him. He's taking it hard."

"But I heard his father was only sick."

"That's what his brother's letter said, but...go see if you can cheer him up."

After taking the stairs two steps at a time, Elijah tapped the door twice then went ahead and opened it when what sounded like a moan escaped.

Clay stood in the middle of the room holding a piece of paper, his eyes red and cheeks wet, like he'd been bawling or something. Elijah stepped in and closed the door.

"Jethro said your pa was only sick. Have you heard more?"

The man only nodded then extended the page. Elijah took it, read Gwen's letter, then let it drop to the floor. "I do not believe Henry Buckmeyer would ever give his blessing for her to marry Braxton Hightower. He's too good a judge of character."

His face suddenly stone, Clay shook his head. "You don't know that, can't say it. He said Cecelia couldn't be courted until she was eighteen, yet the two of you are getting married come spring."

"Yes, after her eighteenth birthday."

"He acts so tough with those girls, but in the end, he gives them whatever they want. And Gwen wants Braxton."

"I'm sorry, Clay. You'd be there if I hadn't of invited you to come along."

He shrugged, then both shoulders drooped. "Me being there wouldn't have changed anything. Pa would have still taken sick. He's pushing seventy, he's lived a good long life. And that last evening at the Donoho, though Gwen acted like she cared, she wouldn't promise to wait on me. I should've realized it then."

What was done was done, but Elijah still hated seeing his friend in so much pain. "Need me to go with you?"

"No, not at all. I spoke with Mister Boaz, and he said the bank would loan me however much I needed."

"You don't have to borrow anything. You've got wages coming and your planter money and..."

“No, I’d rather take out a loan, make regular payments on it. I’m coming back just as soon as....” He turned away, and his hands shot to his face. Elijah studied the floor. He needed to ask Jethro or Brother Paul or someone what was proper.

A part of him wanted to hug Clay, but then another part wanted to slap him and tell him to buckle up and be a man about things.

Crying didn’t help nothing... But then Jesus wept.

His friend turned back and wiped his cheeks. “The day after the funeral, or a week after I get there if he’s already gone, I’m coming back. Texas ain’t got nothing for me. I love it here. Hard rock mining beats sod busting all the way around the stump.”

“I agree. Only thing better is being at the farm with the orphans.”

“Maybe I’ll go back when Bonnie comes of age.”

Elijah smiled at the thought. The youngest Buckmeyer daughter might be the prettiest of them all once she matured, and the young lady had a heart of gold.

But either way, Clay Briggs would always be the younger brother he never had. “It’s settled then. We’ll get you a berth tomorrow. For now, what say we go see if supper is ready? I’m about starved. The little darlings wore me out this morning.”



As promised, passage was booked and with his packed carpet bag in hand and steamer trunk ready, the next morning Clay found himself standing in front of the gangway waiting to board.

He hated it all to blue blazes that everything had changed.

Now, instead of him going home loaded with gold and a high hand, he was rushing back with his tail tucked between his legs.

Plain and simple. Just not right. And truth be told, all he’d probably find once he got there would be Pa’s grave. Ma would be happy to see him though.

“Clay—here. We got this for you.” Mary Rachel held out a golden key with an oversized head, the number seventeen had been engraved in it.

He took it. “What’s this?”

“Your room key. We paid the extra for you to go first class.”

He looked from her to Jethro then Elijah. “You shouldn’t have. Steerage would have been plenty good enough.”

His best friend ever, the man he considered closer than a brother, stepped forward. “We know, but we wanted to do it. Also booked you round trip, so whenever you’re ready, you can get on back.”

Clay eyes threatened to overflow, but he bit his cheek then smiled,

waiting to talk until sure his voice wouldn't fail him. He cleared his throat first. "Thank you, but I'm not going to know how to act sitting at the grown up table."

Smiles passed all around, but factually, truth filled his words more than mirth. For his whole life, he'd been the baby and treated as such. But never here, not with these folks.

Shamed him some the way he'd carried on about Gwen, but at least he'd read her letter in his room. And the bad news about his pa gave him some cover.

Handshakes and a sisterly hug from Mary Rachel made it all become too real. He really was going back to Texas.

For the first two days, he took his meals in his room, but the queasiness never bloomed into the raging seasickness he'd suffered before. The third night, he dressed in his best suit and took his place at the first class table.

Thankfully, he found his place card across the room from the captain's table where all the society folks sat, but still nice enough.

The lady across from him extended her gloved hand. "I'm DeStella Volker."

He took her extended fingers and shook ever so gently. "Clay Briggs. Good to meet you, Mis'ess Volker."

"It's Miss. Well, I'm a widow. My husband...he died in a fire." She smiled half-heartedly, like she didn't want to. "But please, Mister Briggs, call me Dee."

"Yes, ma'am. If you'll call me Clay."

The next smile appeared more genuine. "Well, Clay, I didn't mean to spy, but wasn't that Jethro and Mary Risen I saw you with on the dock?"

"Yes, ma'am. You know the Risens?"

"Please, you make me feel so old." She scanned the room. "But, no, I don't know them, not really, but I know of them. I daresay most of those in San Francisco know their story. How that scoundrel Caleb Wheeler treated her then got himself killed fighting over a barfly. Jethro and his partner striking it rich, starting the Miners Bank, and building the orphanage. Good Methodists, I hear."

"Yes, we are."

For the most of the meal, a nice prime rib with all the trimmings, Dee asked questions. Of course, he acted polite to the lady. Ma would tan his hide if she ever caught him being rude to anyone, but especially a middle-aged widow.

Wasn't no chance of his mother catching him, but still.... Then to top off the evening, the nice lady invited him to the parlor to enjoy a nightcap.

Her treat of all things.

She ordered a brandy and he asked for a whiskey, neat. Pa had been known to sip a little liquor now and again, but his mother would be twisting his ear and hunting a switch if she were to come around the corner and see him imbibing.

Again, a good thing there wasn't a chance—or when he and Elijah swilled all that rice wine in China Town either.

“So, Clay, exactly how much land does your family have in Texas?”

He shrugged. “Pa started with three headrights—that's over twelve thousands acres—but he and Ma sold off some when he had two bad years in a row. Him and the brothers only farm a section, the rest is prime timberland.”

“How big is a section?”

“Six hundred forty acres.”

“And what exactly is a...what did you call it? A headright?”

For all of that drink, and most of the next, he explained how Texas had been so hungry for settlers, the government gave away land grants to the heads of any family who would come, each one being over four thousand acres.

“You got a wife hid out somewhere, Clay?”

He looked off then back. The question knifed his heart, but somehow, he managed a smile. “No, ma'am. Uh, sorry, ma'am. I mean....”

She smiled, leaned forward and rested her hand on his forearm. “Would you like to talk about her?”

“Her?”

“The young woman who has your heart.”

“Nothing to say really, she picked a New Orleans dandy over me. So...that's that.”

“She must have been very pretty to have hurt you so bad.”

“She was. Still is, but...well...I fell in love with her when she was only fourteen. Her father wouldn't allow any courting until she turned eighteen.”

“Smart man.” She tossed down the last of her brandy then stood. “Thank you for such a pleasant evening, sir.”

Ready to talk more about Gwendolyn—or not—he found the lady ending the conversation so abruptly a bit of a surprise. He stood and held up his tumbler. “And thank you for the drinks. Next time, I'll buy.”

She smiled, nodded, then floated out of the room.

Until she disappeared, his eyes followed her. An emptiness threatened to swamp him. He sat back down; another drink? But he didn't really want one. What he wanted to do was go after her. Follow her all the way to her bed.

What reason did he have to save himself anymore? His brain wavered. Why not?

With a deep lungful of fresh air, he pressed deep into the overstuffed chair.

No, that wouldn't do.

It'd break Ma's heart for sure if she found out he consorted with a widow lady. No matter how good looking.

Drinking was bad enough.

Chapter Twenty-four



Disappointed Clay something terrible that the Widow Volker didn't show for breakfast, or dinner, but as she strolled in for supper, the shadow over his heart brightened by at least two shades.

Her looks couldn't compare to his Gwendolyn's—except, she wasn't his at all, not anymore. She belonged to Braxton. Had they already tied the knot?

Thoughts returned to the approaching widow. She brought a hint of sunshine to his gloom. He met her at the double doors of the first class dining hall. "Evening, Dee."

She smiled and glanced at his hand. "Be so kind, would you?"

For a heartbeat, he didn't understand, then realization dawned on his stupidity. He extended his elbow, and she slipped her hand over his forearm. He leaned in close. "I got here early, in time to switch the place cards."

She nodded then nudged him forward. Taking her lead, he escorted her to her place. What? Two over from his seat...who changed them again? He held her chair out then whispered in her ear, "Someone obviously moved them back."

Even with an elderly couple between him and her, Clay managed to arrange a night cap in the parlor.

His treat.

Once seated in the overstuffed wingback with only a small table separating his knee from her dress, again she plied him with questions. Her interest flattered him all the way into the sunshine.

Only a few times during supper had he thought of Cecelia's older sister. Resolved not to mention the name of the girl he used to love, not even in his mind, he focused on the nearness of Dee.

Bonnie's second biggest sister stayed in his past and off his tongue where she belonged. Became only someone from back home who turned out to be so imprudent as to choose a fancy man over him.

"You're thinking about her."

He focused on Dee, the impulse to lie strong, but instead, he nodded.

"What's her name?"

"Cecelia's older sister."

For the first time, the widow laughed out loud. Her mirth a pleasant melodious tune that danced over his heart, but it also

revealed a missing wolf tooth. "I understand, but really, what's her name?"

"Gwendolyn Buckmeyer, Mary Rachel Risen's closest sister."

"Oh I see, and she's eighteen?"

He nodded then took a sip of his whiskey.

"And you are?"

"Twenty-five."

With a grin, she stared straight into his eyes. At first, he held her gaze, matched her boldness, but glanced away before he fell all the way into her clutches.

"Well, darling?"

The affectionate term brought him back to her glistening hazel eyes. "Well what?"

"Aren't you going to ask my age?"

"Oh heavens, no. Jake told me never to ask that question of a lady."

"He's your oldest brother, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." He ducked a bit. "Sorry."

She tossed the rest of her brandy then stood. He jumped to his feet.

Extending her hand, she offered her fingers. "Thank you, Clay, for another pleasant evening."

The huge emerald on her extravagant ring caught his eye, but he managed to take her fingers, and brought them to his lips for a slight, brushing kiss.

The coolness of her skin didn't bring the temperature of his down one chigger. He resisted pulling her toward him. "The pleasure was all mine."

After a soft pat of his cheek, she turned and floated toward the double doors. How did she do that? Walk without touching the floor. Then the sunshine was gone. He flopped back into the chair.

The shadow rolled over him like a storm cloud sweeping across the prairie then hovered, threatening. Menacing. Intimidating.

If he couldn't have Gwen—barnacles, he'd thought her name. Stupid whiskey. But if he couldn't have her, why not Dee. Had she expected him to follow? Both nights? Humph, of course not.

Why would a woman want the likes of him? Gwen didn't. He'd said it again! But the widow's dark lashes waved over her smiling hazel eyes. Beckoning?

So what if she really only wanted him for nothing more than a diversion? Why hadn't he taken the bait? How old was she anyway? She'd almost seemed like she wanted him to know.

Stupid Jake.

Why had he said never to ask a lady her age?



Five days later, it surprised Mary Rachel when the boys brought in a fat envelope. She'd recognize Mama May's sweeping hand anywhere. Eagerly, she tore the envelope's end off.

Once she read the letter, she went herself across the street to the bank then found her husband in his father's office—knee deep in high finance, no doubt.

"Hey, sweetness, something wrong?"

She extended the letter. "Where's Elijah?"

He read it, passed it over to his father, then shrugged. "I think at the foundry. Been working on a plow he wants to take back with him."

Boaz Risen handed the letter back. "This Bull Glover." He glanced up at her. "He's the man your father had to fight so he could buy Miss Jewel's brother?"

"Yes, sir. Can you imagine? What hate he must harbor to send his son to Texas, and to win my sister's heart only to break it into pieces? Makes me want to slap him myself! Or worse."

Jethro touched her elbow. "Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord."

"Oh, I know, but still, sometimes the good Lord needs some help. You know, we're His hands here, right? And those two Glovers need their comeuppance!"

He laughed. "I don't know about that. Who can we send to fetch Elijah?"



Elijah flipped the piece over, doused it with water, then once the steam dissipated, picked the hunk of iron up with his tongs and carried it to the anvil. He loved manipulating metal to his will, but even better, would be the look in Henry's eyes when he gave him his double, mold-board plow.

Ought to go ahead and get that one patented, too. Shame it took the government paper pushers so long to get one back. Sure be nice if he could at least get the planter in production while back in Texas.

Getting the new plow mass-produced, might be asking too much, but with Henry Buckmeyer, nothing seemed farfetched.

"There you are, Elijah. Miss Mary and Mister Risen wants you post haste, and that's exactly the words he used. He made me say it back until I had it just right."

Doing his best to stifle a chuckle, Elijah gave Amos a nod. The young man missed the smarts his sis got. No one could confuse

Francy's brother with a mental giant, but he worked hard and loved his baby sister to distraction.

"Hey, Amos, you bring a wagon?"

"No, sir. The surrey. Why?"

"Never mind, give me a minute. I'll be right with you."

Once it became evident the boy knew nothing of the why, Elijah kept his own counsel during the thirty-minute trip through San Francisco's bustling streets. He loved the town, growing faster than he ever dreamed.

Once upon a time, land speculators split right down the middle on if it'd dwindle, be just another ghost town once the gold panned out.

But sure appeared the town would never suffer such a fate. Besides the shipping, the silver strike put it over the top. No one would ever bet against San Francisco's survival again. They'd be the fool.

He found Mary Rachel and Jethro at the mercantile. She, as usual, behind the desk, with him leaning the counter like he didn't have a dime to spend, but couldn't tear himself away from the beauty.

Elijah knew that magnetism all too well, been there himself once upon a time. Well, not the dime part, but that hadn't been true love as he once thought.

Nothing compared to the overwhelming attraction and deep-in-his-heart need to hold and protect her younger sister. Imagining his life with the lovely Cecelia practically put him under with sheer joy.

"Hey, Amos said post haste, so here I am."

His partner handed him a piece of paper. Elijah took it, read once through fast, then again to make sure there wasn't more to it than his initial impression. He snickered then handed it back. "Seems the game of love has turned in Clay's favor."

Mary Rachel stood and snatched the letter from her husband's hand.

"Maybe, but the Briggs' place is a good day's ride from Daddy's. Not likely he'd go by. And since Clay's planning on heading right back if his father's already dead...he may not find out. Even if he makes it on time, he talked about leaving the day after the funeral...."

"And?"

"Well...we've kicked it around some, and..."

"What's she taking so long to say is, pack your bags."

Elijah tossed it back and forth, juggling leaving his project unfinished, with seeing Cecelia's face again and possibly saving Clay's chance at being his brother-in-law. But...he looked at Jethro.

"Could you see to getting my plow finished and shipped to Texas?"

"No problem. Got any drawings?"

“Yes, in my room and at the foundry.”

“Consider it done.”

“Good.” He faced Mary Rachel. “Looks like I’m going to Texas.”

Mary Rachel smiled at her husband. “Care to go see how soon he can sail?”

Before he could answer, little Susie twirled into the room, her golden curls bouncing, chubby fingertips reaching high over her head. “Mama, we ballerinas!”

Francy leapt close behind one leg bowed, the other stretched behind her, bare toes pointed. “Where you going, Daddy? Can Susie and me go, too?”

“Susie and I, young lady.”

The two-year-old crawled into her mother’s lap. “Me go.”

“I’m going to the wharf and yes, you two young ladies can go.”

Elijah could hardly wait for a little beauty of his own—after a son, of course. He smiled at the baby’s mother. “You got any words of wisdom for me? How I might change your father’s mind.”

She laughed. “We used to argue who was more pigheaded, him or Mama, but no, not me. I could never talk him into seeing things my way.”

Catching some of her mirth, he shook his head. “My biggest problem is that I gave my word to do nothing more than hold your sister’s hand until the wedding. But mercy, as he’s always saying, that’s a mighty hard promise to keep.”

Took the rest of that day and most of the next, but he set sail before the sun melted into the Pacific in glorious shades of reds, pinks and purples. A good sign if the old tale proved true, red sky at night, sailor’s delight.

Mixed emotions rode with him as the harbor grew smaller. Hopefully, Henry would relent and allow Cecelia to marry before her birthday.



Mid-morning a week later, Sofia half-heartedly loaded what she and Braxton would need in a large steamer trunk. She couldn’t believe all the new clothes, and especially loved the fancy-lady dresses he’d bought her.

But the prospect of leaving New Orleans beset her something awful ever since she’d overheard the big fight between Bubba and his father.

Like Henry Buckmeyer would ever let anyone steal one of his girls. She seen it with her own eyes. The man was a cold-blooded killer. Wonder he didn’t murder Bubba that night when he tried to get

Gwendolyn to run off with him.

Texas, who wanted to go there? Not her.

She'd never been anywhere and didn't want to go anywhere. This was her home. She still got to see her mam most Sundays and already arranged the two best midwives just in case one was busy birthing someone else's baby.

What if Braxton got lost meeting up with the Comanche? How could he know where he be with land in every direction?

Hardly believing he was taking her to Texas, she covered her head with both hands. The Indians would love scalping her...or worse. But she could never be no squaw, staying in a tent and eating nothing but buffalo meat.

Life wasn't worth living without gumbo at least twice a week. A shiver raced down her back.

Maybe she ought to light out. But where would she go? Old Bull knew too many folks, so she couldn't hide anywhere around town. And she did like his coin. She ran her fingers over the satiny material of her favorite dress, a shiny orchid one with black lace and little deep purple roses.

Liked his house and food, too, and Bubba's soft mattress spoiled her good, especially when he wasn't in it with her. How big did her belly have to get before that man stopped pestering her?

She should never have danced for him that day, but the beat...she let herself drift back to Congo Square. She'd sure miss that the most. If only every day could be a Sunday. She closed her eyes and swayed to the music that played in her head.

The door burst open. Bubba stopped cold, glanced at all her things on the bed, then at her. "Finish packing, baby. We've got a steamer to catch."

She glared at him. "Why do I have to go? I hate Fort Worth, Texas."

He laughed. "You've never been there. How could you hate it?"

"It ain't New Orleans."

"You're going. Now finish packing. We've got to get to the dock."

"Bubba, please, I don't want to go."

He stepped closer, grabbed the back of her neck, pulled her lips to his, and kissed her rough. He bit her bottom lip too hard then leaned back and stared right in her eyes. "You're going with me, and that's that. Stop whining and get packed."

He shoved her toward the bed.

She stumbled then righted herself and nodded. "Yes, Massuh."

"Now you know I don't like you calling me that."

Should she answer?

Maybe with her sweetest voice, she might get to him. "And I don't

like you treating me that way either, Bubba. You say you love me, so why do you want to hurt me?"

He didn't even draw his hand back or hit her or anything, just turned and left the room. When his tone got rough, she knew better than to mess with him, but couldn't help herself.


Sure hated it that the old Bull hated Henry Buckmeyer so much.

She smiled at Bubba's back going out the door.

She hated the little Bull, too.

But what could a slave do?

Chapter Twenty-five



Henry straightened out the oversized page, scanned several headlines, then settled on an article reporting the particulars of Cornelius Vanderbilt's trip around the world in his yacht.

What an idiot. Why would anyone want to be gone that long just to set a record? Mercy, with that kind of money....

Well, truth be told, his own wealth probably got close, except most of his was tied to the land. And if he started selling it off, its value would nosedive.

Not that he'd ever even considered letting go of one acre, much less enough to affect the market.

"What are you grinning about?"

He looked across what used to be his desk to May's coy smile, as though she'd caught him at something. "Just taking stock. Do you know Cornelius Vanderbilt?"

"Of course, though not personally. We've rubbed elbows at a few parties. Why?"

"He's just returned from sailing his yacht around the world."

"What for?"

"Wanted to be the first to do it I guess, bored maybe. Doesn't say."

She tickled her chin with her feather. "Might be a story there, but instead of Cornelius, it could be...." She studied a spot over his head. It amused him how she always thought about her next novel.

"Hey."

She focused on him. "What?"

"A better story might be based on Yankee Sullivan, losing his boxing title to John Morrissey."

"A boxing book?"

He grinned at her. "He leaves the ring in the thirty-sixth round to slug some of Morrissey's fans, then when he doesn't toe the line in time, he loses."

She shakes her head. "Now where's the romance in that?"

"What if...oh, I don't know. You're the writer, but it could ruin him until he meets this wonderful novelist who saves him from a boring, loveless life."

She smiled. "I love you, dear Henry."

"I love you, too." He folded his paper shut, halved it, quartered it, then laid it on the corner of the desk. "You going to be much longer?"

"I'm not sure. Why? Something you're wanting to do?"

He stood. "Thought I'd check on Crockett, see if he's up from his nap."

Houston-size bootfalls echoed from the hall, then his office door burst open. "Pa, rider coming."

"You forget to knock, Son?"

The boy glanced at the ceiling briefly then shrugged. "He's working a good lather, Pa."

"Anyone we know?"

"Looks like Elijah, but I'm not sure. Want me to get the Patterson?" He held his hand out toward May.

"No, let's go see who it is first before we think about plugging anyone."



Cecelia stepped back, turned sideways, smoothing her waist, then with another turn, looked over her shoulder and studied that view of her new dress before she faced Gwen. "I love it! Thank you, so much! If only Elijah was here."

"Yes, if only..." Her sister exhaled. "If only."

"Oh, don't be so melancholy. You don't know Clay even got that first letter. Maybe he didn't. They'll both be here in another month or two. You'll see. He loves you, Gwendolyn. He'll understand even if he did get it."

"Why would he? I mean I practically scorned him! No. What I see ahead for me is being an old maid aunt to a passel of nieces and nephews, but never knowing the joy of being a mother, having a baby of my own."

"Oh, that isn't true."

"I'll probably spend the rest of my life right here, taking care of the old folk and other people's babies." She glanced toward Crockett.

"But he is our brother."

"I know, didn't mean to sound so resentful." She waved her off. "Besides, I'm not talking about Crockett or the new baby, either. But more in general. I love babies so much, but..."

Her chin dropped to her chest, and several minutes passed in silence. Was she going to start crying again? But then she looked up with a grin. "Sure don't see how Mama can get any bigger, do you?"

"I know, but Miss Jewel says she's got another month or more." CeCe laughed.

"Her belly's liable to burst like a watermelon in the sun if she goes another two weeks, forget a month."

"Hey, you two best get down here." Houston's voice boomed from

what sounded like the first landing.

Rolling her eyes, Gwen shook her head. "That boy needs more discipline. Let's ignore him. Maybe he'll go away."

Then his loud clomps announced his eminent arrival, and the door burst open. The nine-year-old's eyes sparkled, and he grinned at Cecelia. "You have a caller."

"What are you talking about?"

He giggled and twisted his hips like a little girl. "There's a Mister...uh..." He tapped a finger against his chin. "Umm."

"Samuel Houston Buckmeyer!"

"Shhhhh! Y'all are going to wake Crockett!"

The baby reared his head, smiled, then held his hands out to his big brother. "Hooson!"

The boy stepped to the bed and lifted the boy onto his hip. "It's Eversole!" He erupted into guffaws and shook his whole body and the baby who laughed with him. "Elijah's downstairs, and he wants you!" He turned and ran, but stopped at the door. "We don't know why though."

"What? Elijah is here?" She glanced at her sister then hurried to the window and peeked out. A strange horse stood at the hitching post. "How?"

"Oh dear, something must have happened. Best get down there and you can find out."

She stepped toward the door, then backed up and faced Gwen. "How do I look?" She glanced at the mirror one last time. "Should I change? No...yes." She glared at her brother who grinned from the door. "This better not be one of your pranks, little brother!"

His brows furrowed, and he stomped his foot. "Cross my heart and hope to die! Stick a needle in my eye if I ain't telling the truth! Want me and Crockett to go tell him you're too busy primping in front of the mirror?"

"Don't you dare, you little brat! He's really here?"

"Right down there talking to Ma and Pa! And Bonnie's flirting with him, too!" He shot her his goofiest little boy face. "If I's you, I'd get down there." He held the baby's hand high in the air. "Let's go, Brother!"

"Be careful with him going down those stairs!"

Elijah came early?

Her heart thundered. She swallowed and pinched her cheeks then hurried to the door.

When she looked back one last time, tears streamed down Gwen's cheeks. "Oh sister, I'm so sorry."



Gwen covered her eyes as the tears flowed. What a fool she'd been. Why had she sent that awful letter? She sniffed. Ought to go at least tell Elijah hello, but just seeing him would only make it worse.

Guess she should hear for her own self that Clay had...found someone new. Or maybe he'd been so heartsick, he'd just headed north to parts unknown?

Her door creaked open. "Are you deaf? I said Pa said he wanted you, too."

"Go away, Houston."

"Well, fine, crybaby. If you don't want to hear about Clay, just fine!"

She looked up. "What about him?"

"I don't know. I don't care. Pa wants you! Want me to tell him you ain't coming?"

"No!" She glare. "Go on and give me a minute. Tell them I'm coming. I'll be on down."

Even after daubing her eyes and pinching both cheeks, it still looked like she'd been crying. Oh, well, wasn't like Clayton Briggs would be looking at her.

His name echoed through her soul and threatened to push out more tears, but she threw her shoulders back, swallowed, and marched downstairs.

Found them all in Daddy's library. Him sitting at his desk with May next to him in the extra chair, rocking Crockett. Elijah sat in the far wingback with Cecelia next to him in a kitchen chair someone had fetched.

At least Houston and Bonnie were not underfoot.

Her father nodded toward the nearest wingback, like they'd been saving it for her. "Sit down, baby. Elijah's brought news."

Oh no! Was he dead? Had he gone and killed himself over losing her? She'd never forgive herself. Her life was about to be changed forever, ruined. Sure and certain, they'd saved her a ringside seat. How could she live, knowing it was all her fault?

But...she must face the music, as it was hers to hear.

Her mother would turn over in her grave if she ran off without knowing exactly how bad....

She eased down but didn't scoot back then gave her sister's beau a nod. "It's good to see you, Elijah." Such a liar! Why had she said that to him? Him showing up alone turned an ordinary bad day into a horrible one.

It wasn't good to see him, not at all! He just reminded her that

Cecelia's future promised a happy-ever-after, and hers would be anything but!

He extracted the hand that had been holding her sister's and leaned forward. "Clay got your first letter, but not the second one."

She knew it. Had all along. Wanted to think otherwise, but down deep, she knew. "Is he...is Clay..." Braxton had ruined her life and caused her to break Clay's heart.

"The same steamer brought your letter carried one from Jake, about how sick their father was."

Her father nodded. "Yes, we all hated it that J.T. took sick and died while Clay was gone."

Elijah jumped to his feet. "I should have asked first thing! Clay said he'd only stay a week if his father was dead when he got here."

Gwendolyn sprang out of the wingback. "What? Here? Clay's in Red River County?"

"Well, maybe. At least he was, I guess. Left soon as I could after him once Mary got the news about the fiasco in New Orleans."

Gwen grasped two handfuls of her skirt. "Daddy, I've got to go. Try to catch him. Talk to him." She turned toward the door then turned back. "Can I take the black? Can you get him saddled while I change? Please."

"Now just sit back down, Gwendolyn. We'll send someone. You don't even know where the Briggs live, and you cannot go alone."

"I'll find them! Please." She looked to Elijah. "Where was he going next? When would he have arrived? Has he been here the full seven days yet?" She faced May. "Why didn't he come here?"

"Well, darling, I'm certain he thought you'd be married."

"I sailed nine days after he left. Can't be sure how long he's been here, or if he still is, but he said he was coming back to San Francisco."



Sofia put the gun on the little table next to the bed. "Please, Bubba, I don't want to stay here by myself."

He stopped at the door, turned around, then smiled. "Baby, you're in a fort. Nothing is going to happen to you."

"What about you? What if you don't come back?"

He held his arms out, and she ran into his embrace. He hugged her tight, kissed the top of her head, then held her at arm's length. "We're not going that far. I'll be back before breakfast."

She hated it all. Him bringing her to Texas. Old Bull's horrible plan to kidnap one of Henry's daughters. "Please let me go. I don't want to stay here by myself."

His eyes hardened, and he bit his bottom lip as though thinking about hurting her. "I been nice, but you're staying. And that's that. Now if anyone but me comes to this door, you know what to do."

She nodded, but no way was she going to shoot anyone. They hung slaves first then talked about it later.

"Lock the door behind me and prop that chair under the handle."

"Yes, Massuh."

He glared, but instead of the usual backhand her uppity sass-mouth brought, he just shook his head then strolled out the door. She hated him and his father for making him come all that way to ride out and meet a bunch of blood thirsty Comancheros. She locked the door, tilted the chair under the knob, then flopped on the bed. What was she going to do?

Chapter Twenty-six



The axe sliced through the chunk of sawed oak. Clay wiggled its head free from the chop stump then raised it again. His whole life, he'd hated it being his job to keep his mama's cookstove's wood box full.

And yet there he was, axe in hand. He swung again. The two pieces flew off the stump.

He retrieved both, split them again, then tossed them into the cart. He raised the axe. A threatening growl pulled him around.

A horse that looked a lot like Henry Buckmeyer's black stallion pulled a surrey that could pass for the one the man drove to town on a Sunday. The rig approached at a rather brisk pace.

He glanced at the dog. "I see them, boy."

Clay leaned the axe next to the chopping stump, grabbed his jacket, and strolled toward the porch. The surrey passed the turnoff to Jake's place. Once it reached the home field, an arm raised and waved.

Why was Henry Buckmeyer all the way out there? Ma said the man had sent his condolences, but only Wallace and Rebecca Rusk had made it to the funeral.

Did he have news of Elijah? Maybe there'd been an accident.

Clay reached the porch and hollered, without taking his eyes off the surrey. "Ma, we have company."

The surrey passed that field where he could see a little clearer. Henry, alright. The man himself drove, and had to be Miss May sitting next to him.

No! His heart skipped a beat.

Next to her pa sat Gwendolyn Belle. Henry reined the black to a stop, set the brake, jumped down, then helped his daughter out.

"Clay, Gwen would like a word." The man tipped his hat. "Afternoon, Mis'ess Briggs."

A glance over his shoulder confirmed his mother stood in the door, wiping her hands on her apron. He looked back. Gwen stood next to the surrey, holding her little clutch, all demure.

Except it probably concealed a dagger inside to finish the job she'd done on his heart.

A smile of sorts appeared to welcome him, but her eyes held concern, no happy sparkle, distorting the almost smile even more.

Well, she shouldn't be. She'd made her choice, and a bad one.

What could have brought her all the way out there? He eased down the steps as Henry passed. The man patted his shoulder, but didn't say anything.

Clay stopped a respectable distance from her.

"What are you doing here, Gwendolyn?"



Her chin dropped to her chest and her hands fell to her sides, her purse dangling. Though she practiced at least a hundred times what to say, when she looked back up, the pain in his eyes teared her own.

She blinked them back and opened her mouth, but no words came. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I was so wrong, Clay. I don't love Braxton. Never did."

"Guess it's too late to be figuring that out now, Mis'ess Hightower."

"No, we're aren't married. I didn't love him."

"Isn't what your letter claimed."

"I know, but I was wrong. You'd run off to California and hadn't written –"

"Wrote you every day."

"Well...you see...I thought...." If only she'd known. "Just another thing I was wrong about, but I know the truth now. But Mister Broomfield died and –"

His eyes flashed. "What does that old geezer have to do with anything?"

"Well, a new mail clerk lady put Mary's package of letters in his slot. Broomfield...Buckmeyer. If he'd been alive, the mistake would have been caught so much sooner. And Braxton, well...his missives arrived every week. Full of lies I know now, but he was supposedly off helping the Sisters of Mercy care for the widows and orphans. He sent gifts...."

Couldn't he throw her a bone or something? Surely he could tell how hard it was. "And you were –"

"Yes, I went to California. You want to know why?"

She did, but more than that she wanted him to say he still loved her and was willing to court her again. Make her daddy give his blessing to their union. "It doesn't make any difference now, does it? What I want is you, Clay, and you alone."

"Why? Hightower scorn you? Turn you down? That why you're here?"

One hand went to her hip. "No, he lied. Over and over again, he

bore false witness. The whole thing was his father's plan for revenge against Daddy, and Braxton played his puppet. Hightower isn't even his real name. It's Glover. He still wanted to marry me, but for all the wrong reasons. Bless God that we found out his true colors."

"Glover? Why did he lie about his name?"

"Bull Glover is his father."

Realization came to his eyes. "Oh." He backed away a step. "I need to think about all this."

"Come back with us, please. Elijah's at the house. He's the one told me you were here and didn't get my second letter."

"No, I promised Jake I'd help around here until he and the brothers get the plowing done. Only reason I haven't already left."

She closed her eyes. Proved hard to even look at him, wanted him to hold her so much. Couldn't he tell her that everything would be peaches and cream now and confirm that he still loved her?

Filling her lungs, she opened them again. "Keeping your word is good, but just as soon as you can come see to me, will you?"

"I don't know."

"I love you, Clay Briggs. If I wasn't such a ninny, I'd have known it all along."

For too long, he just stood there staring at her like he couldn't get past the pain she'd inflicted on him—even enough to tell her his heart.

If only she could make him understand what a horrible mistake it had all been...and that the one little kiss she'd given Braxton didn't mean anything.

"Gwen, you get in here right this minute to help me with supper. Your daddy's getting hungry. Clay, you see to Mister Henry's horse and buggy. And bring me in some more wood for the stove."

He turned around. "Yes, ma'am." He turned back, his face softer. "Best do as she says, or we'll never hear the end of it."

Gwen knew Clay's mother's reputation—sort of—never spent much time around her except at church and in town now and again over the years, but she bossed everyone like she was queen of the Red River County.

One of the church ladies caused a big hullabaloo at one dinner on the grounds over not being her slave, then never came back.

Bossy might not be a strong enough word.

Even tried to tell Henry Buckmeyer how things were going to be—to Clay's obvious horror.

After supper, Gwen could sleep with the lady of the house, and her father could pick any room he wanted, except Clay's because that bed fit the boy. But she wouldn't hear a word about them going the twelve miles back to Rebecca and Wallace's.

Far as she was concerned, it was settled, and that was that. Pride

swelled her heart at how well Daddy handled her.

After dishes, staying over did allow her and Clay a bit of time together in the old lady's sewing room.

Of course with the door open, and her daddy and Mis'ess Briggs right in the next room, out of earshot but with four eyes on them hard. She couldn't have been better chaperoned if all the deacons from church sat the Briggs' supper table.

Clay only sat, obviously conflicted over his thoughts and what to say. He remained silent.

She glanced at the old folks then leaned in a bit. "Why did you run off to California?"

Cut his eyes first toward her then his mother, he shrugged. "Would you want to live in this house with her?"

"No. I see, but I've already picked out where I want our house to be built."

"Oh, you have?" He stifled a chuckle.

"Well, if you agree, that is. But what's wrong with that? Why's it funny? It's one of my favorite spots on the place."

"Thing is, I am going back to San Francisco. I have a great job there waiting, and I love the state, the Pacific. It's beautiful there."

What? She never dreamed he would want to live anywhere but Texas. "But...why?"

"Same reason I went in the first place. Never wanted to farm or ranch or log. For sure I'm sick of being the baby. What else is there here?"

"Me, I'm here. I don't know what else, but California is the other side of the world."

"Not really. There's talk of running the stage across the mountains, might cut a week off the trip. But traveling by steamer isn't half bad." He grinned then looked over her head like he remembered something—or someone—pleasant.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Jake and Clovey are moving back in once he gets the plowing down, then I'm gone back. No matter what. I've already got my ticket and never unpacked my bags."

She didn't know what to say. Live in California? What about Cecelia, and Crockett and the new baby? But then Mary Rachel lived there. The thought of him leaving again without her tore at her heart.

Could she really live so far away from home? She hated it all to pieces, all the while contemplating the change in him.

Tickled her some. She liked it though. He wasn't a boy anymore.

She liked the grown up Clay. "I saw Jasper at church right after you left. He's getting so big. Had to look twice, your nephew looks so much like you did the first time I noticed your handsome self."

“Coming fourteen this summer. You were...what? Seven when I was his age?”

“Sounds about right. I remember Jake only had eyes for Rebecca, and of course that made Clover see red. Mary Rachel and I pestered Rebecca something fierce until she explained what was going on. Nothing, she assured us. Your big brother just didn’t measure up to Daddy. Pure and simple. Not that anyone really ever did.”

“I think Jake still has feelings for her, probably always will. He’s happy enough with Clover. She’s made him a good wife. But don’t tell Mary Rachel I said that.”

“She knows it. Half the valley came to her wedding heartsick that she’d agreed to marry Wallace and left Jake out in the cold. I think the other half let out a big sigh of relief that she’d finally fallen in love.”

He grinned then stood and extended his hand. “Best call it a night, Ma will be up with the chickens and wanting something from us all.”

True to her son’s words, the woman did want something from her, but it wasn’t scrambling eggs or stirring the gravy. The elder wanted a promise Gwen couldn’t give.

“I don’t know if I could change his mind.”

“Oh, sure you can. Pretty as you are?”

“He says he’s going back, no matter what.”



That same morning, one hundred and eighty-three miles west as the crow flies, after fretting over every bump and little noise for the second sleepless night, Sofia decided Braxton wasn’t coming back.

A full twenty-four hours late from when he promised to be, meant she was fixin’ to owe another night’s rent.

Why didn’t he come? He might have gone and got himself killed.

What could she do?

Already paid the clerk for last night, but she had no intent of giving him any more of the coin in the leather belt Bubba had hid in her carpetbag. She hadn’t dared to empty the thing and count all the blood money old Bull sent.

Figured it was probably heavy enough to buy herself. But who could she get to handle the exchange?

She shook her head. If she intended to steal his coin to buy her freedom, might as well just steal herself, too. Bubba had told the clerk he needed a room for him and his wife.

After that, the man called her Madam Glover every time he seen her, including yesterday when he came around for more money. She lifted her chin, and studied herself in the looking glass.

No way could she pass back home, but here in the wilderness she just might. She knew how to put on airs, read and write enough to get by. Thanks to Auntie Tess for that little favor. She hugged herself, all dressed in her fancy clothes.

Might work. The thought of old Bull realizing he'd lost Bubba and her put a grin on her face.

Having his blood money tickled her even more.

Lifting her dress, she kneeled on the floor next to the bed then pulled the carpetbag from under the bed, resisted counting the Double Eagles, but did retrieve Bubba's map. She spread it out on the made bed and traced the line he'd drawn from Fort Worth to Clarksville.

It didn't seem so far.

Mister Henry Buckmeyer might even give her a reward for bringing word of what Braxton and Bull had planned. For sure he'd help her find herself a new home. Everyone been talking about how California was the place to go.

Might find herself a rich miner. And best of all, no one there needed to know she'd been born a slave.



Cecelia could hardly stand not knowing what Clay told Gwen. But even more, the change in Elijah worried her.

What could it be?

The one and only time she mustered the courage to ask, bless the Lord, he claimed he hadn't had a change of heart, but only lifted one shoulder and whispered that he needed to talk with Daddy.

But he didn't elaborate or even give her a clue as to what troubled him. After Gwen returned, she kept herself busy as though she didn't want to be alone with Cecelia or Mama either and share about the trip.

Tickled her some the way Mama grilled Daddy over why he'd spent the night with Clay and his mama instead of going to Rebecca and Wallace's like he'd planned.

Like the new widow could even hold a candle to May.

Her daddy kissed away her jealousy then even made her laugh. Cecelia loved the way those two carried on, and couldn't wait until she and Elijah could express their love to the world like that.

In a peculiar way, it made her sad it wasn't Daddy loving her own mother. Shame Mama had to pass too soon.

Which did he love more? Did he even know?

It really didn't matter.

He proved his love, mourning for such a long time.

Mis'ess Broomfield had become the talk of the valley marrying again so soon. Cecelia didn't want to even think about losing her Elijah, so she went back to figuring out the best way to get her sister to cough up what had happened.

Finally after supper, once her beloved excused himself from the parlor, Gwen threw a nod toward the stairs. "Want to help me get Crockett down? I promised Mama I'd see to him tonight."

"Of course." Then to her chagrin, her elder sister included Bonnie.

Once her little brother finally stopped fidgeting and took to blowing the little sleep bubbles he favored, Gwen motioned for Bonnie to take him to the bed, then looked to CeCe. "Has Elijah said anything about where you two are going to live?"

Well, that certainly was not what she expected. "No, not that I recall. Why?"

"Because Clay says he's going back to California. He doesn't want to live in Texas."

"Oh no!" That was terrible. She'd never considered ever leaving Clarksville. Rebecca and Wallace living fifteen miles away proved bad enough, but they still got to see them Sundays and holidays. "What about your dream house?"

"He doesn't care, says he doesn't want to farm or ranch or log timber, and...."

"Gwendolyn!" Bonnie scooted to the edge of the bed. "You can't!" The youngest sister turned to Cecelia. "You can. You'll have Elijah, and Mary Rachel's there, so you won't be too lonely."

Ignoring the little brat's meanness, she turned toward her big sister. "What are you going to do? Did he ask you to go there with him?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I knew sort of how bad his Ma...you know her reputation...I never dreamed. He said he's sick of being the baby all the time. That's why he left in the first place. Plus he hates farming and ranching and logging."

The desire to run all the way to Elijah's room swept over her, but she'd promised Daddy never to go there again, and.... "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing right now. He hasn't exactly forgiven me yet. I told him I loved him and had all along. How him not writing—or me thinking he hadn't—he really was. I just didn't know it. And that cad Braxton being so smooth and grown up and.... Oh just wait, CeCe! Clay is changed, it's like he...."

"What? Like he what? Why'd you stop talking?"

"Oh, I don't know, but when we were visiting, talking about things, and he mentioned the trip on a steamer being rather pleasant...seemed he might have been remembering someone."

“Oh no! Do you think he’s fallen in love with someone else? He couldn’t! Did he say anything about her?”

“No, but now that I’m thinking about it, that’s what it has to be. I mean he acted nice enough, but so distant. Not at all his usually gushy self.”

Leaning in closer, Cecelia’s heart hurt for her sister. “That’s awful, but it isn’t like you don’t have your own past to keep hid.”

Bonnie slid off the bed. “What’s she talking about, Gwen?”



Her biggest sister still at home grinned at Bonnie, but only shook her head, like she could share with Cecelia but not her. She loved the one closest in age, but hated her, too.

For six or twenty heartbeats, Bonnie ran all the numbers, and there appeared only one answer that it could be.

“Braxton kissed you, didn’t he? You let him kiss you when you were in New Orleans, didn’t you?” She rubbed her hands together. “Tell me all about it. You shouldn’t keep a kiss from me. Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

Gwen glared, but Bonnie didn’t look away. Finally, her sister smiled a rather sinister grin. “You best keep your mouth shut if you know what’s good for you, little girl.”

Chapter Twenty-seven



Well, that took the pie and the cake! Bonnie's big sister acted almost as pigheaded as Daddy, and that was saying a lot in a long day. She returned Gwen's smirky smile. She'd show her!

Keep her mouth shut indeed. She tore her glare off Gwen and bore into Cecelia. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Have you kissed Elijah?"

"That is none of your business, young lady."

If that didn't tell the tale, she wasn't a Methodist! So her big sisters were trollops, shameless hussies of the kissing kind. "You, too, huh? And I suppose you both know all each other's secrets, don't you?"

Neither answered, but the truth was written all over their guilty faces. She couldn't believe it and jumped to her feet. "I hate you both for leaving me out. Y'all are so mean! I'm a sister, too! But you treat me like Lacey!"

"Don't be silly, Bonnie Claire." Gwen glanced to the bed and crossed her lips with a finger. "Be quiet now before you wake up Crockett or you'll be the one taking care of his fussy self."

"Are you insinuating that we...."

"Shush." Gwen gave CeCe the eye and took Bonnie's hand then pulled her in close. "We both love you, little sister, but truth be told—and you know I'm right—you cannot keep your pretty little mouth shut."

She pulled away. "Can to! But no one tells me anything or takes me into their confidence because everyone hates me!" Willing tears to her eyes, she crossed her arms over her chest and glanced at both sisters. She was getting to them.

"What could I ever say to anyone if I never know anything? So. Neither one of you trust me...and you hate me...but I love you. I promised with both of you never to break Daddy's heart, and that makes me a true sister, but you always leave me out."

The tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks.

The oldest pointed to the spot in front of her. "Sit down here."

It was working.

Studying Bonnie, CeCe squinted. "Don't do it, Gwen."

Bonnie glared at her then kneeled down in front of her best sister,

at least of those two.

She grinned and sat back on her heels. "Why do I have to sit here? Just so you can lecture me? You going to tell me how the cow ate the cabbage?" She wiped her face on her sleeve. "Well?"

"Number one, we do not hate you. You're just young, Bonnie, still a little girl—I know you're twelve, and getting more grown every day—but when you're eighteen, you'll be able to understand grown up things better."

Gwen glanced over and gave a little nod, but CeCe only shook her head.

Then the oldest looked straight back at Bonnie and stared into her eyes for a long minute. "You're right. I did kiss Braxton, and he kissed me back."

Wanting to hear more, the whole story, she waited, but Gwendolyn didn't say anything else. "And?"

"And what?"

"Where were you? How long did the kiss last? Was it wonderful? When did it happen? I mean, obviously, in New Orleans, right? But where? Inside? Outside? I know for sure wherever it happened, Daddy and Mama weren't around. Give me all the details."



Two nights hence, Clay studied on the sliver of moon from his bed.

The day had been unseasonably warm, but the night breeze that waved the opened curtains blew cool and sweet. High wispy clouds drifted in front of the lesser light, adding no credence to his ma's claim of snow coming.

Nevermind the lack of any storm clouds or how seldom it snowed in Texas, she swore she could feel it in her bones. The woman had been so wrong so many times over the years about the weather, but that never stopped her from acting like whatever came out of her mouth was the truth.

His mother was wrong about him, too. He didn't know why she kept on believing he wasn't leaving or wouldn't even breach the subject.

'No, sir, Clayton Butterfield Briggs! You are not going back to California. Your mama needs you right here with me.' The words played over and over in his mind, never changing.

Like using his whole name made it so. He loved her for sure, but she'd never treat him like a grown man no matter how old he got. And especially with Pa in the ground, her bossiness only got worse.

Guess no one realized how much his father had reined her in.

Love. What a strange, horrible, wonderful emotion. The part of Clay that tried to tell him he'd fallen in love with the Widow Volker had been silenced by Gwen's declaration.

She loved him. He so wanted to believe her.

Words spoken with her own mouth. He hadn't even asked either. The wound her letter opened still bled some days, and it pained him how easily she'd been blinded by such a scoundrel, but her wanting to marry Clay—and saying so—went a long way toward healing the hurt she'd caused.

Braxton was a dandy slicker if ever he'd seen one. Clay had spotted that right off. Would every smooth talker who came along turn his beloved's head?

Barring the snow that he was pretty sure wasn't coming, the brothers would finish getting that last block laid by, and then he'd be gone. Jake and Clovie and their brood would be living there in the big house, and Ma would have plenty of help.

A chuckle escaped. She could make Jasper her new favorite. She already called him Clayton half the time.

Yes, sir, from there, he'd head to the Buckmeyer's, then with or without Gwen, on to San Francisco.

Well, if she did agree to go, there'd have to be a big wedding and all, then not one day after that would he be found in Texas.



Covering the thirty-two miles from Fort Worth to Dallas took Sofia two full days, and more coin than she wanted to part with. After only half a day of waiting there, she caught the stage to Mount Pleasant.

She really loved how the scenery changed to lots of trees, huge trees that grew so tall they might just touch God's blue sky.

The sense of being free and the wonderful way people treated her all dressed up in her fancy clothes thrilled her, except she hated wearing shoes. She'd quickly learned to keep her chin high, and that with a little batting of her eyelashes, most men would do about anything she needed done.

Barely able to quit smiling, she cherished the inner joy that overcame any fear or worry.

Besides, she didn't care what Bubba thought. If he was even alive. Successful in sneaking out past the clerk, she hoped the buffoon might think she'd been stolen. Or worse, killed. Then he wouldn't even come looking.

Since she had to layover that night, she found a nice boardinghouse and rented a room without a hitch.

Oh, how she loved being her own boss!

The next morning after a big breakfast at a lovely little café, she boarded The Belle for the last leg of her trip to Clarksville. As the trumpet sounded her arrival in Buckmeyer's home town, she allowed herself a full breath. She'd made it.

No one had questioned her status, not once. It seemed the gold coins she carried went a long way in overcoming the color of her skin.

Yes, ma'am, she just kept getting lighter and whiter. If only she could be there to see the look on old Bull's face when he realized his prized piece of property was gone.

But then she didn't want to be within a thousand miles of New Orleans ever again. If only her mama could be with her. None of her folks would ever want her not to run though.

No, sir, not if the chance presented itself. And here she was. She looked up at the gray sky where clouds darkened, threatening a storm, and thanked the Good Lord that horrible and evil Bull Glover would never have control over her again.

And while his son confessed his love, he still got born with the same mean, cruel blood.

No storm could dampen her cheer. She was a free woman!

The stage skidded to a stop in the middle of town. A ruffian jumped out first. The man had been eyeing her the whole way since Titus' Trading Post, but the other man—a gentleman by his dress—nodded for her to go ahead.

"Thank you, sir."

She loved being treated like a lady.

Soon enough, the driver opened the boot and retrieved her carpetbag, then she strolled into the Donoho Hotel's lobby. What a grand room. Mister Donoho certainly had good taste and must have been a wealthy man.

Scanning the lobby, she tried to decide whether or not she should get a room.

Her new money pouch she'd purchased that morning and wore between her camisole and dress seemed to be slipping, but she resisted the urge to hitch it up. She stepped over to the clerk's desk.

"Good afternoon." Her accent kept improving all the time. That had sounded almost white, certainly uppity.

The man gave her a toothy grin then turned the big registry book to face her. "And to you, ma'am. Need a room?"

"Perhaps. First though, do you happen to know Mister Henry Buckmeyer?"

"Of course, who doesn't? He's the richest man in the Red River Valley."

Richest man? She had no idea. "Would you be so kind as to direct

me to his home?"

"He and his live out south of here, five maybe six miles. How was you planning on getting there?" He leaned a bit toward her and grinned real big. "I'd be glad to take you if you want. I have a buggy."

"Why, that would be so kind. Of course, I'd pay you."

"Naw. That won't be necessary at all. Any friend of Henry's is a friend of mine. If you can wait a minute or five, I'll get Leland, he's my cousin, to watch the desk."

"Thank you, but I'd planned to have a bite of dinner before I leave." She returned the man's silly grin, but having dealt with latches her whole life, she knew this one had more than giving a lady a ride on his mind. Henry's friend indeed. "And so I thank you, but that won't be necessary." She backed up a step. "South, you say? Five or six miles?"

The clerk's face hardened, and he leaned back. "Indians and bandits are bad in these parts. Hate for your new year to start off all wrong. I wouldn't strike out on my own if I was you."

She nodded then turned and marched out. Indians and bandits? Was the man serious?

Across the square, a café caught her attention. Her clutch held enough coin to pay for a meal, but it wouldn't do letting anyone know she had fifty-two Double Eagles hiding under her dress; knew folks who'd got their fool throats slit for less.

Halfway through her plate of meatloaf and creamed potatoes, an older man of color strolled in. He looked around then took a seat in the far corner.

Didn't appear to be a slave and acted white, even though his flesh looked three shades darker than her olive skin.

Other than the first glance, he gave her no nevermind.

Then to prove he wasn't someone's property, he unfolded a newspaper and took to reading.

That settled it. She stood and glanced around, half expecting to see the sheriff or one of his deputies come to take her back, but how could anyone have any idea where she was?

No one paid her any attention. She eased toward the man's table.

He looked over his paper and smiled. "May I help you, miss?"

"Yes, sir, at least I hope so. Do you know Mister Buckmeyer?"

He folded the paper and nodded to the seat across from him. "I do. Why is it you ask?"

She eased down in the offered chair. "Well, I've just come into town and need to talk with him. His daughters are in danger and...."

Oh dear, Good Lord! Why had she said that? She was such a stupid girl, and now....

"Danger? From who?" The man's tone dripped disbelief, and his

expression turned almost comical.

"I'm sorry. Excuse me." She shook her head. "Please, forget I said anything. I'll find the Buckmeyer place on my own. Please forgive me for being a bother." She stood. Approaching him had been a big mistake.

"Wait, please, you're no bother. If you knew how protective Henry was of those daughters of his, you'd understand my reaction. I'm sorry. Sit down, please, miss."

She sat. "I really should speak directly with Mister Buckmeyer. If you could tell me how would the best way for me to get there."

He extended his hand. "I'm Chester Merriweather, and I'd be pleased to offer a ride out with me if you'd like. They should have our dry goods order ready by now."

"I see. So are you Buckmeyer's property?"

"Heaven's no. Henry Buckmeyer doesn't believe in owning another human being. My wife Jewel cooks for him. Has for years. I'm his wife's literary agent." He grinned. "What's your name?"

"Sofia Glover." Oh no! Why had she said that?

All the way, she'd been thinking on a new name to use, tried on a couple. Then the first time asked, she blurts out the truth. She needed a new last name anyway; she wasn't his property anymore.

"As in Bull Glover? You his slave girl?"

She glanced around, hoping no one else had overheard. That'd be all she needed. She leaned in close and whispered, "Not anymore."



The longer the girl talked, the stronger Henry's desire grew to saddle the Black and not stop until face to face with Glover. But cold-blooded murder wouldn't do. He hated that ten dead men stalked his dreams.

Still, how could he not arrange a meeting between Bull and his Maker? And he couldn't imagine ever regretting that one.

Mercy, Lord, the man wanted to steal his babies out of nothing but spite. His daughters!

'Vengeance is mine saith the Lord' echoed through his soul.

God's Kingdom come, His will be done in his life. How many times had he voiced that prayer?

"That second morning, after he'd been gone a whole extra day, I figured Bubba...well...that he wasn't coming back. I 'spect he's dead. Couldn't see going back to N'Orleans, so I followed his map here. He was going to give it to the Comancheros soon as he made the deal."

She offered the look he'd seen on so many slaves, hope tinged with disbelief.

The young lady lowered her eyes. So demure and so beautiful. He could hardly believe the likeness to his Tess. His Tess? Why had he called her that?

For a moment in time, he traveled back to Congo Square and then onto the wagon he had crawled into with Sofia's mother, or was it the girl's grandmother?

Was he crazy? He shook his head and focused on the young woman who brought so many memories flooding back.

She looked around the packed parlor. Everyone hung on the girl's words. "I didn't know where else to go. I hear California is nice, and they say it came in as a free state. Thought I might go there. Be safe. Think it's far enough away?"

No one broke the silence to answer her question, then, Jewel stood. "How far along are you, Sofia?"

Lifting both shoulders, she squirmed. "Maybe five months, the midwife said. But she also told me she could tell better once the quickening was full on."

The cook held her arms out. "Child, don't even think about running off until that baby comes."

Sofia stood and made her way into the old woman's embrace.

Like that was the cue, everyone started talking at once. Henry held his hands up. "Quiet, please." They all complied. "First, Bonnie, you move your stuff in with Cecelia. Sofia can stay in your room."

His two youngest daughters looked at each other and did not appear to particularly like his pronouncement but knew better than to argue with him, especially in front of everyone. He'd probably hear about it later though.

"Second, no one—and I mean no one—is to go anywhere at any time without being armed."

Houston nodded. "I was thinking the same thing, Pa. I dibs the Patterson. It fits my hand right nice."

"You, young man, will not be armed, so you don't go anywhere without me or some other adult who is, understand?"

"Aww, Pa." He scuffed the floor with his boot. "I'm almost as old as Charley was when he plugged that Comachero."

"Hopefully, it won't come to that."

"Third, everyone keep an eye peeled. I'd rather a mess of false alarms than for some fool to sneak up on us. Anyone else got any ideas?"

For a while he listened, but no one offered anything worth implementing. After Chester slipped out, Henry sent the girls to getting Sofia settled in, then he and May retreated to his library.

Once he closed the door, she broadsided him with a salvo of questions.

Chapter Twenty-eight



His wife's eyes spewed fiery sparks. “The poet says there’s no fool like an old fool.” She stepped toward him, and the fire turned to malice. “So tell me what kind of fool are you, Henry?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You lusting after that Sofia girl. She’s just a child! No older than your own daughters for Heaven’s sake! And don’t deny it either. I saw it plain and simple. And her flagrant, barefaced flirting right there in front of me! Your wife!”

“Not so.”

“I saw it all! You can’t deny it! I’m sure everyone else in the room did as well. The desire you harbor for that young woman is abhorrent. Why, it was all I could do to keep from slapping you both.”

Henry exhaled then slowly filled his lungs. At least, she’d waited until getting into the library.

“No, May, you’re wrong. I admit being struck again about how much she looks like Tess, and yes, it took me back to Congo Square for a second. But no. Absolutely. I was not lusting after that girl.”

“Yes. You. Were.”

“Why would I? I have the best, most beautiful wife in all of Texas.”

“Don’t you sweet talk me, Patrick Henry Buckmeyer! And you best wipe that stupid grin off your face, too. I mean it. There is not one thing funny about this. Not one!”

She plopped her weight into his chair behind the desk, cradling her extended belly. “And why why why would you even think about inviting her to stay here—in my home—without discussing it with me?”

“I hadn’t, but once Mammy, I mean Jewel suggested it, I wasn’t about to turn her out. Mercy, sweetheart, she’s young, alone, and pregnant. She’s been a slave. And worse, owned by the Glovers. I can’t believe you’d —”

“Stop.” May closed her eyes and rubbed her face with both hands. He hated it her being so upset, but figured keeping his distance wise. “So tell me about Tess.”

“I have, darlin’. There’s nothing more to tell. She....” He scrunched both shoulders trying to coax just the right words out. “It was only a youthful indiscretion. That’s all. I regretted not being a

virgin when I married Sue, but mercy, she never asked about my past. I always figured she didn't want me asking about her Andrew, and I never told her about Tess."

"Any woman who would cause that strong a remembrance was never 'only' anything."

"But it never mattered, not that much. For sure, nothing like you've imagined. Even back then. I thought I might have loved her. Nothing like Susannah though; a part of me will always love Sue, but you...you are my wife, and the one and only one I'm so much in love with now that it hurts sometimes, Millicent May Merriweather Buckmeyer."

"Truly?"

"There's nothing I would ever do, or even consider, that might jeopardize our relationship."

"So then, are you saying there's no need for me to stay up all night or post a guard on Sofia's room?"

"Mercy, no. I am not interested in that girl. I'd just as soon she go to California, but she's here and apparently carrying Bull's grandchild, like he needs another reason to want to harm us."



May extended a hand toward him. She hated being so jealous and knew not trusting him was pure ridiculous. She loved him so much sometimes it definitely got the best of her. He took her hand and pulled her up and into his embrace.

He kissed her then leaned back and looked deep into her eyes. "I love you."

"I know you do, and I love you, too, but please promise not to ever look at that girl again like you did today."

"Yes, ma'am. Want me to turn her out? You know I will if you say so."

"No, of course not. Poor thing. She didn't ask for any of this. We'd be no better than Bull...." She wrinkled her nose then grinned.

"Bonnie and CeCe are wanting a word with you."

"What did they say?"

"Not a peep, but didn't you see the look on their faces when you put Bonnie in with Cecelia?"

"Of course, but I wanted that girl upstairs, the only other empty room is next to Elijah's."

Good to know. Silly, her thinking he wanted to keep Sofia close. "I see your logic."

"Thank you. Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

She grinned. "Yes, but don't go getting any wild ideas, Crockett is napping on our bed."

"Me? Mercy, I wasn't thinking anything but how blessed I am. You've got to know, May, that I love you so much...sometimes it hurts."

She kissed him lightly. He'd never know how much it would hurt—if he ever did mess up—her...and him. "Say, speaking of Elijah, have you noticed the change in him? Something is weighing him down."



Clay waved one last time, turned to the front and settled in, determined not to look again. Why did she carry on such? Didn't she know her theatrics hadn't worked on him in years? He chuckled.

The old adage played out true. Old habits really do die hard, that's what his pa always said.

"What are you laughing about?"

"Your granny and the way she carries on if she don't get her way."

"She just doesn't want you to go. Figures she'll never see you again, I guess." The boy tilted his hat and peered up from beneath its brim. "Everyone says you're her favorite, but that's not what she's been telling me."

He eyed his nephew for a half turn of the wagon's wheel. "Oh? What's she filling your head with?"

"She says it's me now, that I'm her favorite, on account of I remind her so much of Grandpa when he was my age."

Funny how the words nicked his heart a bit, but at the same time, a wave of relief washed over him that she had someone new to gush all over. Guess she'd resigned herself to him being gone after all.

More than once, he'd been tempted to share his plans with her, but he hated saying anything to her that she'd claim he promised if it didn't work out.

"You do favor him."

"Dad says none of us fell too far from Grandpa's tree."

"True, but then he and Ma were first cousins, so guess it all goes back to their grandfather."

"Really, they were first cousins?"

"No one's told you that story?"

"No, sir." Jasper flicked the reins over the mule's back then grinned. "Cousins huh?"

Starting way back with his double-great-grandfather's trip to America, he told about him coming from England as an indentured

journeyman and relayed all the family history he knew.

The boy's delight in the telling helped keep Clay's mind off Gwen some, but not completely. By the time the boy ran out of questions, he neared the bluff overlooking Langford Creek.

Closer he got, the tighter his gut knotted.

What if she said no?

What if Henry wouldn't agree to her going to California?

Mary Rachel had run off and got married without her daddy's blessing, but Caleb Wheeler paid for that sin with his life. No, he'd not be party to doing anything behind the man's back.

One fine day—after he'd made his own way—he'd come home, but not with his hat in hand and a steamer trunk load of past sins to atone for.

Either Gwendolyn came with her father's blessings as his wife, or he'd go alone.

Could he really go off and leave her? It'd be hard now that he knew her heart.

"Isn't this their lane?"

Clay looked up. "Yes."

"You sure Mister Henry won't be mad about me staying the night?"

"I am."

True to his word, the master of Clay's fate welcomed him and Jasper with open arms.

But then what could he do? Hospitality was expected, even demanded in these parts...leastwise for friends and family. Hopefully, he'd be the latter real soon.

Awesome food came along with even better company. Could his beloved look or act any sweeter?

The relief on her face when he darkened her father's door blessed his heart, but then instead of sweeping her off her feet and smothering her with kisses, all he could do was take her hand. Still...touching her warm, smooth skin....

Of course that evening in the parlor, no one discussed anything of substance. Bonnie Claire kept her hawk eyes trained on him and Gwendolyn in the beginning, but looked to be having more and more trouble seeing to her job, for gawking at Jasper.

Now wouldn't that beat all, Clay marrying Gwen then his nephew tying the knot with her baby sister.

Might ought to tell the boy to stake his claim early. If the promise of her beauty bloomed, she was liable to be the prettiest of all the sisters. And that was saying a lot.

That night, once the boy got under covers, he finally huddled by the oil lamp with his friend. All evening Elijah kept himself all into

Cecelia's prattling, but who couldn't understand that?

Likewise, he'd been perfectly happy to be enthralled with the Buckmeyer daughter of his heart.

His friend hung his hat on the back of the chair then ran his fingers through his hair. "Anyone fill you in on Braxton's slave girl?"

"Henry warned me to be on the lookout, told me the story."

"Good, CeCe told me Gwen laid it all out about how wrong she'd been regarding that idiot dandy. You believe her?"

He hiked his off shoulder. "Sure seemed sincere. Said she loved me and had all along, but...you hear about our letters getting waylaid?"

"I did. Shame the way it shook out."

"Sure is. She thought I'd gone off and forgot about her, and there Glover was writing every week and sending gifts...lying like a dead skunk about taking care of orphans and widows. I do. But now she's saying everything I was hoping to hear all along."

"What have you got planned then?"

"Well, I tried to talk with Henry." He kept it to his own self how much the delay relieved him, but he sure hoped he'd be able to get to sleep. "He put me off until tomorrow, but even if he gives his blessing, I won't be marrying her unless she agrees to go back to California. I've decided that much."

"You tell her about wanting to come back after a year or three?"

"No, and I'm not. Didn't tell Ma either. She carried on worse than the last time."

Elijah laughed. "Proud I wasn't there, but if she didn't love you so much, she wouldn't act out."

"True. And of course, I love her, but she's so...so... smothering sometimes." Clay glanced across the room. Jasper's lump rose then fell slightly. Either the boy knew how to fake it just right or he'd slipped into a sound sleep. He looked back. "What about you and Cecelia? Has she agreed to go west with you?"

"Haven't discussed it with her yet, but I need to talk with Henry myself."

"Why? Thought you already had his blessing."

"I do, but Jethro and the Lord convinced me I need to tell the man about my past."

Clay didn't know how to answer.

The scripture Pa used on him every time he got suspected of misbehaving came to his mind. He could almost hear his voice. The truth will set you free, boy. That and the old man's razor strap. He stared at the wick's flame.

Hopefully the next day, he and his friend would hear the truth, and it'd give wings to their dreams.



With all within her, Gwendolyn wanted to hate Sofia, but how could she? The slave couldn't be blamed for her situation. Nothing could be counted her fault. She'd done the right thing, coming here to warn them about Braxton and his father's evil plans.

She could've run straight off to California without saying a word to anyone about anything.

How could the man do it? Gwen shuddered. Bubba indeed!. That name fit him way better than.... She didn't even want to think his real name, much less give it voice. What a mess.

But bless the Lord, Clay came back for her. Everything would all work out, it had to. Except...what was she going to do about going to California?

If only CeCe would commit, but she still hoped Elijah would stay in Texas.

There might be a chance to get Clay to stay if Elijah did, but Gwen didn't think he would.

Her door creaked open. Her sister's face appeared in the slot. "Good, you're up. Sofia's crying."

Gwen set her needlework into her lap. "About what?"

"I don't know. Think we should go see?"

"Oh, mercy. Is she wailing or something?"

"No. It's real soft sobbing, akin to a fresh weaned pup crying for its mama."

Laying her mending on her side table, she stood then slipped on her housecoat that had been doubling as a lap wrap. She hated leaving her warm room, but lifted the oil lamp and headed for the door.

What else could she do? She waved CeCe into the hall. "Come on, let's go see."

On the third tap, the door opened. Even in the dim lamplight, it was obvious the girl had been crying. Gwen looked past the slave. No one had bothered to kindle a fire. "My room is warmer, or we could build you a fire."

Sofia ducked her head. "It isn't that cold in here. Don't trouble yourself."

"Want to talk?" CeCe stepped from behind Gwen. "I couldn't help but hear you crying."

Without raising her chin, the girl nodded, except she appeared older. "No, I'm alright. Wait. I suppose. If you want."

Gwen slipped her free hand into Sofia's and tugged. "Come on to my room. I hate being cold."

Her sister sat the bed while Gwen arranged her chair and one for Sofia close to the hearth.

Once she had another slab of oak on the embers, she smiled at her late night visitor. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen, according to my mama, but Aunt Tess says she got it wrong, and I'm only fifteen. I's born in September though."

"Wow, I'm older than you then. I'll turn eighteen in March."

"And I've been nineteen since November. Miss Jewel doesn't know for sure how old she is either. On a good day, she claims she's only fifty, but if her feet get to swelling she thinks maybe closer to sixty." Gwen resisted putting another chunk of wood on.

No telling how long either of her guests would stay, but she wanted enough oak to knock the chill off come morning.

"So why were you crying, Sofia?"

"On account of I don't want to leave, but I don't want to stay either. I feel safe now, but I need to get to California, as far away as possible. Bull will send someone looking for me. I belong to him.

If bounty hunters find me here, your pa will have to turn me over to them." Tears welled again and filled her eyes.

"Daddy would never let them. We'd hide you."

"But traveling might be easier now than with a newborn, and I need to get as far away as I can while I can. And what if those Comancheros didn't kill Bubba. He'll be looking for me, too. He'd probably kill me for coming here."

"No. He loves you, doesn't he?"

"He owns me, Missy. I'm his property, and I didn't just steal myself, I took his blood money, too, but I had to. Just like I had to come and tell your pa what the Glovers planned. Didn't intend to stay, but I feel so safe here."

Jumping off the bed, CeCe came over and took her hand. "You are, and you should stay."

"That night in the hotel, I thought Mister Henry was going to shoot Bubba dead, maybe me, too, and..." She shook her head. "That look in his eyes that night, even in the dim light, I saw...." She hugged herself like the north wind had just whipped a gust under the door.

Her sister laughed. "We call it the wolf. He doesn't let it out much. Hardly ever."

"Oh my, I was never so scared or relieved in my whole life that night." Gwen looked between the young women, "Once I turned Braxton down, and you two started chasing me up those stairs." Tears welled. "I don't know how, but there Daddy was in the hall, and I knew—sweet Lord, did I ever know—I was safe."

Sofia nodded. "Think he'll really let me stay here until I birth this baby? His woman didn't seem too happy about me being here at all."

“We saw that, too. Didn’t we, sis?” CeCe turned back to the girl, “But that isn’t like her at all. I don’t know what was going on.”

“Yes, but Mama May wouldn’t turn you out.” Gwen mostly believed the words that came out of her mouth, but a part of her doubted it. For sure and certain, the beauty wouldn’t ever live under the same roof as her and Clay.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Elijah had noticed the sparks flying the evening before between Clay's nephew and Bonnie, but at the boy's leaving that morning, the way the two acted proved almost comical.

Even with the crowd gathered on the porch, the two still carried on. Him stealing glances over his shoulder as he drove away, her standing out in the yard watching until the wagon turned the corner.

But he couldn't blame either. The good Lord put a hole in everyone's heart that only a very special someone could fill. His stood so close, yet....

Turning, he faced Henry, who stood in the doorway. "A word, sir?"

The man nodded then headed inside. Elijah slipped his hand into Cecelia's and followed her father to the last place on earth he wanted to be.

Once the king of his fate sat behind his desk, with his own special someone on his right, Henry glanced from Cecelia to Elijah. "What's on your mind, Son?"

A wry chuckle escaped, and he shook his head. "Running's the truth, but the stakes are too high."

The man returned the bit of mirth then his face turned hard. "What's wrong?"

Trying to draw strength from her sheer beauty, he glanced at Cecelia, sitting the other wingback next to him then back to her father. "Well, sir, before we can even discuss any wedding plans...."

Oh, Lord, give me strength.

"I need to tell you both something. You and your daughter, sir." In tipping his hat to Miss May, he remembered and took it plum off. "You, too, ma'am, of course." The words about choked him, but somehow he had to get his past out in the open.

Cecelia squeezed his hand. "What is it, Elijah?"

"When my parents got the fever and run off, hunting the mother lode, well...I, uh...at first...well, I'd worked enough to...." He filled his lungs then exhaled slow. "Well, whatever coin I made, I'd drink up. When my pockets went empty, I'd go back to smithing."

"Well, my goodness, how old were you then? Sixteen or seventeen? Who could expect such a young boy to be perfect?" She offered him a reassuring smile then turned. "Isn't that right, Daddy?"

“Let the man say his peace, darlin’.”

“One night, this miner I’d done some work for took me to...this...uh...den...in China Town where all the patrons smoked opium.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know it when I went, but didn’t know the Lord either then, and well...the first day Clay and I were in San Francisco, he noticed a rickshaw turning off Broadway going into China Town.”

“Oh, sweetheart!” Cecelia gasped and covered her mouth.

Couldn’t let her reaction keep him from his mission. “I guess my pride convinced me a little sake.” He faced his love. “Rice wine. Anyway, thought it couldn’t hurt. Next thing I knew, Clay and I were throwing punches right in the middle of a brawl. Praise God for Brother Paul. If he hadn’t come along when he did, then only the Lord knows where I’d be.”

“Who’s this Paul?”

“Pastor at the Methodist church there in San Francisco.”

“Did you and Clay smoke any opium?”

“No, sir. I’d never do that again. After the rice wine, we went down the street to the Dragon, that’s where we got into the fight.”

“How’d that come about? You a mean drunk?”

“No, sir. This miner started cursing a blue streak at this sporting lady. Clay took exception, and the man’s friend thought he should get involved. Next thing I know, I’m waking up bruised and battered in my room at Jethro and Mary Rachel’s house.”

The man leaned back and eyed him for a bit, glanced at May who only gave him a tiny lady-like one-shoulder shrug. If Elijah hadn’t been watching, he would have missed it. “Took guts to tell me about this.”

“I really didn’t have a choice, though. Between the Lord and Jethro Risen, I knew I had to.”

“What about you, baby? This change anything?”

Cecelia squeezed his hand then faced her father. “No, sir. I’m confident he’ll never do it again, but I’ll love him until the day I die, no matter what. That much is for sure and certain.”

Henry took turns looking at him then his daughter. The silence hung heavy.

“Sir, there’s one more issue.” Elijah made himself not look at his love. “Actually two.”

“What else?”

“I know you said we needed to wait until March, ’til after her birthday and all, and we agreed. I planned on not coming back until that time, but now...I really need to get on back –”

“No! You can’t, Elijah!” She obviously wanted confirmation from her father, and he understood, but....

“See, I found this high pressure hose in New Orleans when Clay

and I went west last fall, and it's working true wonders, but Jethro wants me to modify the hammer mill. There's so much we need to redo at the mine. And he's got several ideas for the dairy. I'm needed there."

"What's the other thing?"

"Clay. He and I work so well together, and there's so much to do there, and..." He shut his mouth. He hated prattling on. No one liked that, leastwise no man he knew. Didn't want Henry to think he was sticking his nose in Clay's business either. No easy job to read the man; if only he'd give him a ray of hope.

"Is there more?"

"No, sir."



The San Francisco opium trade and how pervasive the drug wasn't news to Henry, but he'd never known anyone personally who'd indulged. Knew plenty of drunks, even imbibed a taste now and again his own self.

May going sweet tea only on him when he got her pregnant with Crockett put his nightly toddy habit on hold.

"The opium, how long has it been?"

"Over four years."

He looked at May who wore her poker face, but he'd bet she leaned toward him doing whatever he wanted. If only Sue...Cecelia was her daughter, too, and nothing existed she didn't have a passionate opinion on.

Except if here...she wouldn't be any help anyway. She'd be too preoccupied clawing May's eyes out.

As bad as he wanted to grin thinking of it, he stayed the course. "What about you, Cecelia? Are you willing to go with Elijah?"

"Yes, sir. I mean I never planned on going to California. However, I've been thinking on it since you and Gwen got back from the Briggs. I'd hate leaving Texas, and I really don't want to." She faced her intended. "But I love you, Elijah Eversole. Though I hate the thought of not living here, there's no way I could stand you leaving without me again."

"I love you, too, Cecelia, so much it hurts."

She looked back. "Can we, Daddy? Can we get married like...in say...uh...a week?"

"A week? Your mother can't have everything ready in seven days."

A May-sized fist punched his arm. "Don't be silly, Henry. The Lord made the heavens and earth in six. You say the word, and we'll be

ready.” He loved the way she smiled at his girl. She really did love his daughters like they were hers.

And the young lady smiled back just as big. The love between the two shown as bright and plain as the sun at noonday.

“Can we then? Can we, Daddy?”

He held his hands up. “I haven’t decided anything yet.” He shook his head. “I need to think on this. What about your sister?”

“We can have another double wedding! Like you and Mama! That’ll be so much fun.” CeCe jumped to her feet. “I’ll be eighteen in a few days anyway.”

“More than two months.”

She glared at him. So much like her mother. Oh, Susannah, why did you have to die on me? “Like I said, a few days. So that’s no real reason to say no. And Mama said we could be ready, and please, Daddy, please! Say yes.”

He held his hands up higher. “You two get out of here and fetch Gwen and Clay. Your mother and I need to talk with them.”

For a second, CeCe held the glare then puckered her lips and sent May a thank-you kiss. To him she offered the saddest, poutiest please he’d ever seen. He waved her out, but what could he do? Break his baby’s heart?

Once the door closed, he faced May. “What do you think?”

“I like the whole idea of a double wedding.”

“What about the opium?”

“Seems to me, my darling, if he were a fool, he would have returned to his folly by now. Instead, he confessed.”

“I hate the thought of them running off to San Francisco. It’s bad enough Mary Rachel’s out there. It’d be so quiet. How...”

She leaned over, and kissed him. “Can’t keep them babies all their lives. We’ll still have Bonnie, and we can go visit in a year or so, after the baby –”

“Mercy. Did you see how Jasper Briggs was mooning over her?”

“Of course. A body would have to be blind not to, and she bounced it right back.”

“See? If I give in to CeCe, then Bonnie’s going to think she can get married at fifteen.”

“Oh, you. She will not. Two months short of eighteen is getting married right under the old-maid wire in some circles.”

“Not mine.”

She obviously stifled a grin, because her eyes smiled all the way to town and back. She seemed to be formulating a better retort, but a light tap on the door sounded, and she leaned back, a victorious smile plastered on her so kissable lips.

“Come in.”

Clay held the door for Gwendolyn then waited until she picked a wingback before he eased into the other one. Henry smiled at his baby then faced the young man she now claimed to love. "I heard just now about your and Elijah's first day in San Francisco. Anything you need to get off your chest?"

He rubbed his chin like remembering getting hit. "Right off—we were barely off the ship—this rickshaw turns the corner ahead of us; well, I didn't know what the thing was until Elijah told me."

"An unusual sight if you've never seen one."

Henry glanced at May then back to the boy. Why did a woman always have to help someone tell a tale? "Go on."

"We decided to get us a bite in China Town, drank too much of that sake. Man, who'd think rice wine would pack such a punch? Real sneaky, nothing like hard liquor. Almost like drinking water. We decided on a beer to wash it down."

He glanced at Gwen who didn't seem too enthralled with the boy's story or its telling, but she looked right back at him like she didn't care for what he was seeing either.

"So we were minding our own business at the fancy saloon we'd stopped in, then this loud-mouthed miner took to berating this lady. No one was taking up for her. So I stepped up and told the guy to stop talking like that. Next thing I know, I'm getting beat worse than any whipping my brothers ever put on me. If not for Elijah, no telling what might have happened."

"Elijah said the lady was a soiled dove."

"What?" Gwen scooted to the edge of her chair and glared at Clay. "You were consorting with a sporting lady?"

"No, never." He pressed back like he wanted to get as far away from her as possible. "I didn't know nothing about her occupation, not until later when Elijah told me, but no man should ever say those things to any woman. No matter what."

"Amen."

Henry ignored his wife. Apparently, she added whatever came to mind. "Just now, you mentioned hard liquor. You drink much, Clay Briggs?"



"No, sir. I wouldn't say much. Some, maybe, but not regular. Other than that day, I've only been drunk two other times."

"Care to elaborate?"

Clay glanced at Gwen, who still appeared to be mulling him being in a saloon that had sporting ladies. He looked back to her father.

“Not really. But it sounds like you want me to, and you have a right to ask. I was sixteen the first time, a couple of the brothers let me tag along on a hog hunt with John and Caleb Wheeler.”

The man grimaced “Enough said, and the other time?”

“My twentieth birthday. Pa bought me a jug of prime squeezings. First and only time I saw my father even tipsy. After he went to bed, the brothers and I kept on nipping at it.”

“Nothing else happened in California you need to talk about?”

The no he wanted to announce got drowned out by his ma’s admonition to guard the truth. Only took three or four dozen switchings for her to make the point in a mighty way. The truth.

Best get it out now. He looked at Gwen then back to her father. “Could your daughter and I have a few minutes alone, sir?”

At first, Henry only stared then lifted his off shoulder. “Guess you two will be fine in here, sitting those chairs, right?” He looked at Gwen first then back.

His “Yes, sir” beat Gwen’s by a gnat slap. The words echoed. The silence threatened to deafen him, except his heart pounded so hard, surely she could hear it.

“What were you thinking?”

He scooted sideways. “About what?”

“Being in a saloon? With harlots!”

“I only went there to drink me a beer, nothing else.”

“Is that what I have to look forward to? You and Elijah getting yourselves a beer now and again with sporting ladies?”

“No, now forget about that. There’s more important things we need to discuss.”

“Like what?”

She was so beautiful, and he rather liked her being jealous, gave her profession of love credence. But he may be about to lose her forever. “First, if your pa agrees to us getting hitched, are you willing to come to California with me? Not for a visit, to live there.”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Will you promise me that once we’re married you’ll not be going to any saloons, ever? I’m not opposed to a beer now and then. Daddy has his toddies, but you do not have to go to such a place as that, I’m sure.”

“Of course, but married or not, I have no interest in...uh...those type of...encounters.”

“Good.”

“So you agree? We’ll live in San Francisco.”

“How often will we come visit?”

“Don’t know, and can’t say, but it’s a month both ways. We can’t

be running back to Texas every year.”

Her lips thinned, then she leaned forward a bit. “How many babies you want? Have you ever thought about it?”

“Not ten. Ma said she wouldn’t take for me or any of us, but if she had it to do it over again she’d would have had me quicker and stopped birthing babies sooner.”

For a second, her expression said she didn’t get it, then she smiled, but maybe still didn’t. “If I want to stop at say three, you good with that?”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Can we come back once every three years? I don’t think that’s too much to ask, is it, Clay? I can’t imagine living so far away and never seeing my family.”

He exhaled. Why was someone always wanting him to promise he’d do a thing when no one but God knew the future? “I’ll try, God willing, but traveling first class is the best, and it’s expensive. And with little ones....” He shrugged. “We can try, but please don’t hold me to it.”

“What do you know about traveling first class?”

There it was. He filled his lungs then exhaled slowly. “That’s the rub. Jethro and Mary Rachel paid the extra for me to travel first class. For two nights, I stayed in my cabin, so heartsick over your letter. Then when I finally did go to supper, I met this woman.”

Chapter Thirty

So there it was. The reason he'd been acting so pigheaded! And him making Gwendolyn think all along it was all her fault! Still, if only she hadn't written that letter. "I see. Do you love her?"

"No. I actually tried to talk myself into it. But when you and your daddy showed up at Ma's and you told me outright you loved me, I was sure then just like I've really always known...it's you I love, and only you."

"If you loved me, why would you take up with another woman? What's her name?"

"DeStella Volker."

"What kind of name is that?"

"German, except she was born in New York. A widow going home. Lost her husband in San Francisco. And I told you. Because you'd broke my heart, Gwen. I thought you'd married that dandy. Besides, I didn't take up with her. Never said that."

What did that mean? Either he'd been unfaithful, or he hadn't. Except she'd sent that letter setting him free, told him her own self that he should find... "I hate it that I got so confused, sent that horrible letter. Can you forgive me?"

"Already have, Gwen. That's behind us like I want this to be."

"Well, if you didn't...why are you telling me about her?" She'd messed everything up and wanted to spit. "DeStella, then. How old is she?"

Why had she put so much venom on the lady's name? Wasn't like she had any claim on Clay when he met the woman, and what possible difference did her age make? She needed to just hush up and let him say what he had to.

"Thirty-four, and well...that last night, I uh...I...well, I kissed her. Or rather, she kissed me, but I kissed her back."

Oh, Lord, her own sins had found her out! How could she not tell him about Braxton now? "Is that all? No...uh...you know, going back to her room?"

"No, ma'am. I admit, I was sorely tempted, and she seemed plenty willing, but...." He hiked his shoulder.

"What does that mean?"

"God...you. The kiss was bad enough, but I've been dreaming about you for so many years now." His lips spread into a sheepish

grin. "I only want you."

Her chin dropped to her chest. Nothing fair about him baring his heart, confessing his and Widow Volker's kiss. How could she not confess her own sin? "I've got to tell you, Clay, and tell you true. I kissed Braxton, too. So...if you can forgive me, I guess we're even."

She looked at him without raising her head.

His eyes flashed and his fist balled. "When did this happen?"

"At the hotel. Right before I found out his real name. He wanted me to run off with him."

He leaned back and stared somewhere over her head. She hated the pain she'd caused him, but he should never have run off with Elijah, either. Still, she should never have gone to New Orleans. "I love you, Clayton Butterfield Briggs."

He lowered his gaze. His eyes calmed, still pained, but not on fire. "I didn't even know you knew my whole name. Can't recall ever telling you."

The change of subject relieved her enough to grin. "Well, silly. You've got sisters and a mother who loves bragging on you. I've been knowing every little detail about your life for a long time."

"Been spying on me, huh." He picked his hat up and twirled it. "I like that, but tell me something, Gwendolyn Belle Buckmeyer. Is every smooth-talking fancy man who comes along going to turn your head?"

"No, no, no, a thousand times no! At first, I only made eyes at Braxton to see how you'd react. I loved it all to pieces when you came back and didn't let Daddy run you off. Going all the way home then coming right back." She leaned forward. "I promise for sure and certain, I'll love no one but you all my days."

Clay slipped off his chair and knelt on one knee. "Will you marry me, sweet Gwendolyn? Will you be my wife, birth my babies, and grow old with me?"

Tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "Yes, yes, yes! A thousand times yes!"

He took her hand, stood, then pulled her to her feet. Of their own her arms embraced him, and he held her tight.

A light double tap then the door swung open. Mama's jaw fell open, her Daddy glared. "Gwendolyn Belle."

She pushed Clay back a step. "He asked me! We're getting married! Oh, Daddy, I'm sorry, but can we? Will you let us, please? It was just one little hug, we —"

Clay turned around. "Sir, it was all my fault. We love each other."



"Hold it right there." Henry hoped his horse-trading face held

firm. "May, would you be so kind as to escort our daughter out. I need a word with Mister Briggs."

She bumped his shoulder rather hard as she stepped forward and took Gwen's hand. "Come on, baby. Let's see if Miss Jewel needs any help."

Gwen pouted as she let her mama pull her out, but kept her tongue where it belonged. His second daughter didn't take after Sue as much as Mary Rachel, but she carried that single focus trait. Once his ladies had left and closed the door behind them, he nodded toward the far wingback then eased around his desk.

"I'm sorry, sir. Like I said, it was my –"

"You're repeating yourself, Son. Apology accepted."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, if I do give you two my blessing, and you run off to California, how are you planning on supporting my daughter?"

"We...uh...I mean Elijah and me. We'd been splitting our time between the mine, the dairy, and the foundry, sir. He pays me good wages, sir. Plus, I've got my percentage of the planter money coming, and we're working on several other inventions that I've helped with. There'll be gold and silver aplenty."

"You two going to be living in a wagon? Or the mining camp? Or dairy barn? Where you planning on hanging your hat?"

"Haven't thought of that, sir, but Jethro and Mary Rachel have a huge home. Elijah has a regular room there, and they put me in the one next to his. If not there, then we can build one or rent for now." The boy scooted out to the edge of his seat. "Sir, I haven't told Ma or Gwen what I'm thinking. You know how a woman can take a plan and turn it into a promise."

A chuckle escaped, did he ever. "Yes. What of it?"

"I figure in three—no more than four years—we can return to Texas with enough money to build Gwendolyn her dream home on that bluff south of here. Or if you'd rather, I've got my share of Pa's land. No papers drawn up just yet, but he split it equal among us, except Jake and the others get the farm land, me and the girls timber, but that's fine with me."

"I see."

"We could build on that. Either way, Texas is home. I plan on coming back, but not with my hat in hand and no gold in my pockets."

Love for his baby tempted him to tell the boy that his daughter had all the money they'd ever need, but he admired the young man and his plan. Especially the part about coming back to Texas to raise his family. If only Mary Rachel and her Jethro thought the same. Still, best if Clay made it on his own.

The Judge thought Henry was marrying Sue for her money until he showed the old bird otherwise. Guess young Mister Briggs didn't want it gossiped he'd married Gwen for hers.

"Do you love her, Son?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it necessary to tell you we'll kill you dead and feed you to the hogs if you ever hurt her?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't expect anything else."

He waved him out. "Tell May I need her."

The boy stood. "Sir, do we have your blessing then?"

"Not yet. We'll talk more after supper."

"Yes, sir, and if you would be so kind to keep my plans between us men."

He nodded. "A married couple shouldn't have secrets."

"Yes, sir, but I'd like to tell her in my own way and in my own time."

He flicked his hand, and the boy took his leave. He leaned back in his chair—if only he could have kept them all babies.

A chill pulled his attention to the fireplace. It needed tending. Once he kneeled at the hearth, the door opened.

May marched in with her arm around Sofia. "Henry, you need to hear what this, what the young woman is saying."

"Have a seat. I'm listening." He stirred the dying embers then put the last three slabs of oak on the iron rack. Houston needed to fill his box, probably all of them. Perhaps more so, the boy needed a switching or twelve to remind him of his chores.

His beautiful wife put her hands on her hips. "Go ahead. Tell him."

"Yes, ma'am. Well...uh...Mister Bull...he's been reading all of Miss May's books. And he told Bubba that he was a fool for not doing the same."

Henry stood, dusted his hands, then helped May ease into the wingback he preferred, but then if she'd taken his chair—her normal seat—that would have put him next to the girl. He grinned on the inside but didn't dare let any of it show. Her jealousy over his indiscretion some forty years ago proved to be somewhat sweet.

"Interesting. Is that all?"

"No, sir. Also, he be telling Bubba that you have to know your enemy if you're going to defeat him. He also reads that Chinese war book a lot."

"*The Art of War* by Sun Tzu?"

"Yes, sir. That's the one I'm talking about. Bubba said old Bull made him read it more than once when he were coming up."

Was dueling legal in Louisiana?

Have mercy, Lord. Defeat all the plans of those who plot against me and mine. He gave the girl a thank you nod then looked to May. "I need a word."

She turned to Sofia. "Tell him who taught you to read."

The girl grinned. The exact same smile he remembered from so long ago.

"My Auntie Tess, taught me of a Sunday down to the Congo Square before the music got to going real good. Me and her would hide out, and she'd drill me on my letters. She scared me good not to ever tell, and I never did."

"That's good."

"But Miss Jewel, she been telling me you've bought all the darkies here on your place except her and Mister Jean Paul, and then gave them their own selves for nothing. Is that true, sir?"

"Yes." He raised his left shoulder, the right had been painning him some with the cold snap.

"Think maybe if I was to give you the coins, you could buy me from old Bull?"

"How much money do you have?"

"Fifty-two Double Eagles, plus some silver and a five-dollar piece. Bubba say he only pay three thousand for me. Is what I got enough?"

The amount certainly surprised him. Over a thousand. But if Bull knew he was involved, or even thought that it was his own money... well, he'd think on it. "Might be. Where'd you get that much money?"

"Bubba only took half of the blood money, and left me guarding the rest when he went off to meet them Comancheros. He give me a gun, too, even though he made me promise I wouldn't shoot no one. I told him I never could shoot no one anyway."

Mercy. He sure could right now. Bull and his lying son, too, if he was still alive. And maybe while he was at it, Elijah and Clay. "Let me think on it. Might be a way to trick old Bull into letting us buy your freedom with his own money."

"That be wonderful, Mister Henry."

He flicked his fingers toward the door. "Thank you."

The girl jumped to her feet. "You are surely welcome, sir. Miss Jewel says you're a saint, and Miss May here is even nicer." She smiled at his wife. "Thank you, ma'am."

He nodded but sure didn't seem to him that he deserved sainthood, not much of one if anybody asked him.

More than likely, saint didn't want to solve all their problems with a gun. May extended her hand and let Sofia pull her up. "Go see if Miss Jewel needs any help, dear."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

Henry waited until the door closed then stood. "Come rest your

back.”

Once back in his usual place and she in hers, he held one hand out toward the fire. Its flames warmed his skin, but failed to touch the chill on his soul. He faced his wife. “What do you think?”

“As much as I want that man out of our lives for good and forever, I definitely do not want you going to New Orleans or anywhere near it.”

“What about the girl?”

“Oh, I don’t see any way we could humanely turn her out. I suppose I must admit the Lord brought her here.”

“If you say so.”

“Well, Henry. What else am I to say? And Miss Jewel just went on and on what a hard worker the girl is. Seems there’s nothing else to do but have her stay at least until the baby comes.”

So far, May echoed his own thoughts. “What about our not-so-baby girls and their beaus? What are we to do with the lot of them?”

“Well. If you tell them no and send the boys packing, it’s a fact I’d have to stop telling everyone how smart you are.”

He grinned. “What about a double wedding? Think everyone will be happy with that? Or are they each wanting one of their own?”

“Are you spoofing? No. Getting married on the same day is about all they’ve been talking about.” Getting the conversation off Sofia did wonders for her mood. “We all figured when you didn’t shoot anyone, the weddings were on.”

He leaned back and closed his eyes. A part of him wanted to saddle The Black and ride another circle around the home block, but once a morning would have to do. New Blue might not measure up to his sire, but came close.

And Levi on the south eased his mind some. Maybe he should post pickets though.

For a few heartbeats, he envisioned turning his home into a war camp. Then decided to stop borrowing trouble. If Braxton arranged a raid, or showed his own face, he’d deal with it when it came.

“Henry?”

He looked at May.

“Are the weddings on? You can’t keep them waiting forever.”

“Got any pirate pages for me? I’d love to sail the Caribbean for a few minutes before supper.”

She cradled her belly then stood. “No, I do not. You’ve already read all the new, but...” She grinned. “Crockett is with Lacy Rose, and Houston’s building the Alamo out of the blocks Charley cut for him. Think you might fancy giving me a back rub?”

He jumped to his feet. “Do I ever.”

Chapter Thirty-One



Once the runaway came out of her daddy's office, Cecelia knew in her heart that her father would call her and Gwen in any minute. She waited and waited and anticipated then finally stopped watching the door after the clock chimed the hour.

Nothing.

Maybe Mama worked some more at convincing him, but how could he refuse?

Her or Gwendolyn? He just couldn't. She loved Daddy, she really did, but the man totally exasperated her at times. Before, she couldn't understand Mary Rachel running off, but now...well, she almost could.

Even though she never would and had vowed with her sisters to be a true daughter of the heart, she definitely understood her oldest sister's decision.

Helping with the evening meal's preparation kept her hands busy, but that was about all. Then, on her second trip carrying food to the table, the urge to run and beat on his door almost overwhelmed her.

What were they doing in there? Had he decided not to give his blessing, and Mama was doing her best to talk him out of it?

The guys got back from checking on the sawmill and Elijah acted totally unconcerned. Made her want to just go and shake some sense into him.

How could he be so calm? Chatting away with Clay and Uncle Chester at the end of the kitchen table about boring old politics!

Of all the things to talk about when his life—right along with hers—teetered on the edge of happiness or ruin?

Couldn't they see she and Gwen had a wedding to plan?

And why weren't they making plans of their own? They were the grooms after all.

Where was Daddy?

She should start sewing on her dress, and she didn't even have the material yet! She almost regretted Mama saying a week. She couldn't be ready in a month.

Except Elijah just had to get back, like they couldn't live without him in California. Him and Clay both! Where was Gwendolyn anyway? She could be down there helping her worry.

Especially if CeCe's intended refused to!

What if Daddy decided to let her and Clay go ahead and wed, but not her and Elijah because of his stupid rule?

Tears welled, but she blinked them back. No, surely not. He would never do that, would he?

Miss Jewel spread a cheese cloth over a bowl of greens. "It's almost six, baby. You quit your frettin'. Now fetch the bread and everything is ready. Your daddy and Miss May will be coming out for supper any minute now."

The intoxicating smell of the woman's fresh-baked yeast rising rolls overwhelmed her for a split second, but even her love of the little darlings failed to calm her nerves.

She stepped through the door, and there he sat on his throne at the head of the table like the king he really was. He looked up and smiled. She floated to her place, setting the bowl on the corner nearest her.

Bless God, he was going to break his stupid rule. He smiled, didn't he? Right? For sure and certain, he was about to make her the happiest daughter on the face of the earth. Well, of course, Gwendolyn would be glad, too, but Cecelia would definitely be happier than her sister.

Yes, that had to be why he was smiling so big.

"Daddy."

He silenced her with a look and mouthed later. But why? He should be telling his mind.

Once everyone held hands, he blessed the food his own self, then took to stuffing his face as if it was just another supper at the Buckmeyer's. Why? He had to know what he was doing to her!

Nothing but pure cruel! She hated him almost as much as she loved him. She tried to eat, but even baby bites threatened to gag her.

After seconds—or was it thirds?—he finally set his fork on his plate.

Yes?

But nothing.

What?

He just sat there. His expression seemed pleasant, but he did not look like a man about to make two of his daughters ecstatically happy. She glanced around the table. Everyone else had finished, too—except Uncle Chester who still picked away.

The slowest eater in the whole wide world! The man always had a quarter of his plate still to eat when everyone else's were clean.

What had he been doing?

Unable to hold her peace another minute, Cecelia faced her daddy. "Please! Please say something! Set my heart at peace. Please."

He stared right at her for what had to be two full minutes. She never looked away, even though her eyes filled with tears. At last, he did, and stood.

“Gwendolyn and Clayton have professed their love and have asked for my blessing to be married.” He gazed to his right and eyed Clay. He nodded, then Daddy looked to Gwen. Her face might crack right into two pieces if she grinned any bigger.

Just to drive her crazy! That’s why he was doing this.

He shifted his eyes back to her. “As have Cecelia and Elijah.”

And? And? Say it!

“The ladies tell me everything can be ready in a week, and that my daughters and new sons are all willing to tie the knot together in one big ceremony.”

Yes! Yes! Oh, yes! He was going to let her get married, too. She glanced at Gwendolyn who flicked the tip of her nose. Happy tears flowed. Even Bonnie jumped up and down.

“So, dear daughters I love with my whole heart, I give you my blessing and pray you and your husbands will make God the third party in your unions, so they will grow in love and endure all life’s trials and triumphs.”

She squealed then jumped to her feet, but Gwen reached him first. His arms reached around enough to hug them both. Mama joined in, then Bonnie and Houston, Clay and Elijah, too. She loved them all, and the world was beautiful!

She was getting married!



Bonnie loved it. He’d broke his rule. No way could he not let her get married early now.

The days of preparation flew by. She helped some, but even though she threw a middling stitch—according to Miss Laura, no less—Mama relegated her to minor chores and sitting her littlest brother. Both her big sisters practically ignored her.

Losing them both to California bothered her some, but the mental rearrangement of the furniture in Gwen’s room brought some solace.

The best bedroom in the whole house—except for Daddy’s—would be all hers! And she’d get to move in much sooner than she ever dreamed with the both of them going. She hoped she wouldn’t be lonely, but she wouldn’t.

Mama would have her a little sister. She and Lacy Rose would spoil her in such a good way, dressing her to the nines and having high tea parties. Well, she’d be married and gone before that....

But still, a baby sister would be way better than another bratty boy.

All the Briggs came the day before and stayed the night in the bunk house—all but Mis'ess Briggs who took Sofia's bed, so she'd slept with Bonnie. Then despite all the hustle and bustle and all her sisters' fretting, the big day arrived.

Mama outdid herself transforming the hall into a romantic garden with greenery and pinecones painted in shades of blues, Cecelia's favorite color, and purples, Gwendolyn's; like having real flowers everywhere a person looked.

Netting draped the ceiling and crown molding, every table practically in the whole house, and the banister, too, with each spool wrapped in ribbons topped with big fluffy blue and purple bows.

Every bench on the place and then some sat in rows like at church, and quilts padded each one with one layer that fell to the floor and made them look real fancy. A row of chairs across the front would make sitting more comfortable for Mis'ess Briggs and Mama.

Even the weather cooperated, bright and sunny with just a hint of chill in the air.

The day promised pure joy and pretty perfection.

Miss Jewel and Sofia had been baking and cooking all week. By the heaps of food covering every inch of the table, appeared they expected to feed every soul in the whole of Red River County.

They posted Lacey Rose to guard the likes of gingerbread and tea cakes from little boy snitchers, but Bonnie caught her with crumbs on her chin.

Didn't tell anyone though.

Couldn't remember a time when Miss Jewel hadn't cooked more food than everyone could eat, and her sister's wedding sure wouldn't be the first.

Though Daddy claimed he figured only a hundred souls would show, it being such short notice, Bonnie stopped counting at a hundred sixty, and wagons were still showing up steady.

Reminded her of a revival meeting or the big summer fish fry, with so many folks coming together.

Then it was time.

She hurried upstairs and peeked out the window. Jasper and his dad and uncles came around the house escorting Clay and Elijah. Made her giggle out loud how somber they all looked, like going to a hanging.

The sight of her love all dressed in his starched shirt, sporting a leather vest just like the others, stopped her heart from beating.

That Jasper Briggs surely was one fantastic-looking young man, much more handsome than Clay. She remembered to breathe.

Then he glanced up right at her and grinned. Her knees threatened to buckle. She returned his smile then hurried to take her place at the top of the stairs.

Charlie ushered in Mis'ess Briggs then Mama.

In her beautiful new dress with puffy sleeves, carrying her nosegay of pink roses that she loved, Bonnie waited to start the whole thing off. Lacey Rose would follow her, dropping real flower petals ahead of the brides.

Daddy had emptied all the flower shops from Clarksville to Jefferson and back; her sister's bouquets draped almost to the floor and set their gorgeous dresses off beautifully. The fiddler started playing, and the crowd hushed.

Once all the eyes looked upward, she walked down the stairs in time to the music. Lacey Rose whispered, "I'm right behind you."

Daddy escorted Cecelia down first, then she took her place next to Elijah on the left. Daddy ran back up and brought Gwendolyn down next on his arm.

Bonnie paid a bit of attention to the words spoken and the vows exchanged, but the picture in her head of it being her and Jasper standing there professing love for one another blinded her to much else.

He loved her, she knew it. A true mature love, not the way she thought Clay loved her. That was only puppy love when she'd been just a child. Jasper's love was real. Otherwise, why would he be staring at her so?

The opportunity to get him alone before the Briggs headed back home just had to present itself.

A word with him was definitely in order.

After all, they were going to be married in three—no more than four—years.



"I do."

Finally, with the last promise made, May slipped out of her chair to see about the cake. She'd noted how Bonnie and Jasper kept eyeing each other, but earlier had put a bee in Rebecca's and Rose's ears to help her keep an eye on the twelve-year-old.

So obviously boy-sick, no telling what the young lady might get herself into if allowed.

Clay vouched for his nephew. Assured her Jasper was a keeper, but young folks those days didn't have a lick of sense—not nearly as mature as she'd been at that age.

The baby kicked, reminding her she hadn't rested all day. Oh well, she could relax once the newlyweds were off. In the meantime, she

had a house full of guests to see to.

The gift tables overflowed. With hugs, kisses, and a basketful of thank-yous, and the newlyweds were off in the carriage with Chester driving and Charlie riding shotgun. The Black never looked better or pranced higher.

How had her husband arranged that?

All the way around, he'd outdone himself with all the short-notice preparations. The flowers alone cost him dearly, but then...what's money for if you can't lavish it on your babies?

The rig turned the corner, and her husband faced her.

"Thank you, May, it was wonderful." A tear escaped his eye. Such a softhearted man, and she loved him for it!

"You're welcome. What where you all huddled up with Levi and Wallace about?"

"Oh, I decided to send them to New Orleans along with our newlyweds."

"Why?"

"Even Bull Glover isn't stupid enough to try to steal my babies with those two guarding them."

"So we're babysitting Charley and all the little Baylors?"

"It'll be fun, and I'll be able to sleep at night."

A bit of ruffly pink and white caught her eye disappearing around the corner, followed close after by Jasper Briggs. "You, sir, had best see to your other baby girl." She nodded to her left.

He gave her a blank stare. "What?"

"Just now, Bonnie hurried around that corner with young Jasper Briggs right on her heels. Might want to take a little walk."

He jumped off the porch. "Oh, Lord give me strength, and let my aim be true."

THE END

Epilogue

Two days after the Briggs' and Eversoles' short stay in New Orleans and their safe departure on the S.S. Antelope headed south and west, Glover's main house slave brought Bull a letter on a silver tray along with his afternoon whiskey.

He held it up. "Good. About time that boy sent word."

Bull took a sip, tapped the letter to one end, then tore off the other.

Father,

That faro dealer you dug up ambushed me. Him and his Mexican bandit he'd hid out jumped me a day's ride out of Fort Worth. Took half our coin and left me hog tied on that cursed Texas prairie. I'd left the other half behind with Sofia. Took me three days to walk back to town once I got loose. Wonder the idiot didn't slit my throat, but the worst part is that my Sofa had departed by the time I returned, albeit two days later than I'd told her. No one seems to know exactly when she left or where she went. I hope she might be coming home and not met some dastardly fate. She just seemed to disappear.

Sold my gold ring for a grub stake then walked to Dallas after a teamster claimed someone who looked like her might have hitched a ride with one of his competitors. I'll stay here until I hear from you. I've got a job at the Cotton Club tending bar and would appreciate you sending cash there for me. Until then, I've got my ear to the ground on where she went. If she arrives there, please send word post haste and ease my mind.

Braxton

Bull crumpled the letter then slammed down his drink. For the longest, he stared off until a calm settled over his soul.

"You've won this round, Henry Buckmeyer, but you'll not win the fight."

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Book #3 HOPE REBORN, 1850

Book #4 SINS OF THE MOTHERS, 1851-52

Book #5 DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, 1853-54

Book #6 JUST KIN, 1861-65 (Debut January, 2016)

Characters...*alphabetically*

Reader beware! Spoiler warning! If you aren't up to date on reading the series, you might find out info you'd rather wait to know, but the saga, continues...

~ **Baylor, LEVI Bartholomew** – born November 2, 1817 orphaned at age five was reared by Aunt Sue Baylor until fourteen then Uncle Henry Buckmeyer, too, after he married Aunt Sue. Levi became husband to Rosaleen 'Sassy' or 'Rose' Fogelsong Nightingale Baylor; step-father to Charley Nightingale and Bart Baylor (Comanche Chief Bold Eagle's son); then Pa to Stephen Austin, Daniel Boone, Wallace Rusk, and Rachel Rose.

HIS TITLE: HEARTS STOLEN // *On Scene in:* VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, and in contemporary Red River Romance SING A NEW SONG

~ **Baylor, Rosaleen 'ROSE' (SASSY) Summer Fogelsong Nightingale** – born August 24, 1823, married at fifteen in the fall of '38 to Charles Nightingale, then was stolen by the Comanche summer of '39. She lived with them five years as the captive third wife of the chief. She birthed Nightingale's son in February 1840, then they were rescued October of 1844, and she married Levi in mid-December of that same year. She birthed Stephen Austin in April, 1846, Daniel Boone in 49, and Wallace Rusk in '53. She finally birth a daughter, Rachel Rose.

HER TITLE: HEARTS STOLEN, // *On Scene in:* HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN, // *Mention in:* VOW UNBROKEN, SINS OF THE

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART,

~ **Baylor, Bartholomew 'BART'** – born July 20, 1845 to Rose and Levi, but blood son of Bold Eagle

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, // *Mention in:* HEARTS STOLEN

~ **Briggs, Clayton 'CLAY' Butterfield** – born October 13, 1827 to J.T. and Maud Briggs and courts and marries Gwendolyn Buckmeyer.

HIS TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jake – born in 1812. Clay's older brother is married to Clover and has son Jasper with her.

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jasper – born in 1837 to Jasper and Clover (or Clovey)

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ Boyd, Francine 'FRANCY' – born October 28, 1842, a California orphan God sends to Jethro to take to Mary Rachel. She quickly becomes a part of the family.

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ **Buckmeyer, BONNIE Claire** – born December 1840. Henry and Sue's fourth child.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, CECELIA Carol or 'CeCe'** – born April 10, 1836. Henry and Sue's third child. Marries Elijah Eversole in 1854.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ Buckmeyer, Charlotte born in 1854 to Henry and May
Coming in JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, David Crockett** – born 1851 firstborn of Henry and May.

On Scene in: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, GWENDOLYN Belle or 'Gwen'** – born Nov. 29 1834. Henry and Sue's second child. Marries Clay Briggs in 1854.

HER TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART // *On Scene in:*

HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ **Buckmeyer, Patrick HENRY** - born March 6, 1798; killed a man at fifteen, fought in the Battle of New Orleans at sixteen. At thirty-four, he married Susannah 'Sue' Baylor in 1832, and became stepfather to her Rebecca and father to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire before becoming a widower in Dec '44 at Houston's birth. Finding love again, he married May Meriwether in 1850 and fathered Crockett and Charlotte.

HIS TITLE: VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ **Buckmeyer, Sam HOUSTON** – born December 1844. Henry and Sue's fifth child, first son. His mother passed at his birth, so was motherless until he was six years old.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN // *Mention in:* HEARTS STOLEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Buckmeyer, Susannah 'SUE' Alicia Abbott Baylor** – born May 15, 1803, married Andrew Baylor at eighteen in 1821, widowed at nineteen and became guardian aunt to orphaned Levi Baylor, birthed Rebecca in the next year. At twenty-nine, she married Henry Buckmeyer in 1832. Mother to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn, Cecelia, Bonnie Claire, and Samuel Houston.

HER TITLE: VOW UNBROKEN // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN // *Mention in:* HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Eversole, ELIJAH** – born January 2, 1826, moved to California in the gold rush days where abandoned by parents as a teen, followed in his father's blacksmith trade and loves inventing and building new helpful machines. He becomes partners with Risen and Jones in a gold mine. Marries Cecelia Buckmeyer in 1854.

HIS TITLE: DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART // *On Scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

~ Jones, MOSES – born October 13, 1816, a Scot partnered with Jethro Risen in a gold mine, marries . 1854.

On scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS // *Mentioned in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Langley, LAURA is rescued at fifteen in 1844 along with Sassy. She

was pregnant at the time and the next month delivered Lacey Rose on the way to the Buckmeyers'. She stays on there as teacher, and marries Jean Claude Rozier.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN // *Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Langley, LACEY Rose** born November 16 , 1844 in Nacogdoches to Laura, only fifteen when Lacey's father, a Comanche brave, had captured her.

HER TITLE: JUST KIN // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ **Meriwether, CHESTER** born a slave on October 7, 1803 to Commodore Meriwether's slaves Silas and Honey Pie, He was 5, about to be 6, when May was born. He married JEWEL (formerly Mammy) in 1851.

~ **Meriwether, JEWEL (formerly Mammy)** the Buckmeyers' cook after Henry rescued her and her son Jean Paul Rozier who also works for the Buckmeyers.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN

~ **Meriwether, Millicent MAY** born August 23, 1808 to the Commodore and a, a successful New York dime novelist who heads to Texas to interview after seeing a newspaper article about Rangers Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. She marries Henry Buckmeyer there. She gives birth to David Crockett in 1851.

HER TITLE: HOPE REBORN // *On Scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN (January 2016)

~ Meriwether, Silas born a slave in 1808 on the Meriwethers' Sea Side plantation

~ **Nightingale, CHARLES Nathaniel Senior** - born 1805, married Rosaleen Fogelsong, fathered Charles, Junior (Charley), though was never around him.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN // *Mention in:* VOW UNBROKEN

~ **Nightingale, Charles 'CHARLEY' Nathaniel Junior** - born a Comanche son to the chief Feb 27 '40 to the captive third wife of Bold Eagle, Rosaleen, but Charles Nightingale was his father. Rescued in 1844 by Texas Ranger Levi Baylor. Killed a man at ten when Comancheros came to return his mother to Bold Eagle.

HIS TITLE: JUST KIN (January 2016) // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Risen, JETHRO** – born September 22, 1830 to Silas and ??, partner of Moses Jones in a gold mine. Married Mary Rachel Buckmeyer Wheeler in 1853 and later that year, reconnected with his estranged father. Found an orphanage and a bank in San Francisco.

HIS TITLE: SINS OF THE MOTHERS // *Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Risen, MARY RACHEL Buckmeyer Wheeler** – born August 3, 1833. Henry and Sue's firstborn eloped with Caleb Wheeler without Daddy's blessing and moved to San Francisco. Her husband soon murdered, she's a widow mother of Susannah "SUSIE" Wheeler. Remarried Jethro Risen, adopted an orphan, Francine "FRANCY" and birthed baby girl Rebecca "BECCA" in MONTH, 1853 and Silas Reuel, Jethro's firstborn son, in 1854.

HER TITLE: SINS OF THE MOTHERS // *On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rusk, REBECCA Ruth Baylor** – born June 14, 1823; Sue's daughter 1st husband Andrew (died Rebecca's birth). Nine years old on the Jefferson Trace in 1832; twenty-one in November, 1844, when she met Wallace Rusk, married him at 27 in 1850. No children.

On Scene in: VOW UNBROKEN, HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Rusk, WALLACE** – born August 15, 1819, a 16 year old orphan picked by Henry Buckmeyer and young Levi Baylor on the way to the Battle of San Jacinto, served with Levi Texas Rangering, fell in love with his sister Rebecca sight-unseen, and after wearing her down, married her in 1850. No children, but Lacey Rose Langley was named after him.

On Scene in: HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN // *Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ **Wheeler, Caleb** – born August 29, 1828, cousin to John and Lanelle, partners in the Mercantile in San Francisco after eloping with Mary Rachel Buckmeyer in 1851, father of Susannah.

On Scene in: HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ **Wheeler, John** – born April 17, 1825, Lanelle's brother, Caleb's cousin, partner in San Francisco Mercantile.

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ Wheeler, Lanelle – born September 24, 1832, John's sister, Caleb's cousin, married Moses Jones in 1852

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS,

~ **Wheeler, Susannah “SUSIE”** – born October, 1851 in San Francisco to Mary Rachel (father Caleb deceased)

On Scene in: SINS OF THE MOTHERS // *Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART



Remember Miss Jewel's Skillet Apple Pie?

Well, here's a recipe much like hers but updated for you! From author friend Ann Everett (A.K.A. Pattiecake McAlister) who has recently debuted a MUST-HAVE new cookbook out: [Sweet Thangs!](#)

A perfect gift cookbook, full of fantabulous recipes! I know...she tested them on her writers' group colleagues, so I helped sample as she went! I highly recommend Sweet Thangs!



Apple Pie in Cast Iron Skillet

Ingredients

- 3 pounds Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored, quartered, and thinly sliced.
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 cup granulated sugar

½ cup butter
1 cup firmly packed light or dark brown sugar
(Ingredients continued)
3-(9 inch) pie crusts
1 egg white
Extra cinnamon and sugar for sprinkling

Directions

- ~ Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
- ~ Toss apples with cinnamon and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar.
- ~ Melt butter in a 10-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat.
- ~ Add brown sugar, and cook, stirring constantly, 1-2 minutes or until sugar is dissolved.
- ~ Remove from heat and place 1 piecrust in skillet over the brown sugar mixture. Brush crust with egg white which has been whisked until it's foamy.
- ~ Spoon $\frac{1}{2}$ of apple mixture over piecrust, then top with second crust, and brush with egg white.
- ~ Spoon remaining half of apple mixture over that crust, and top with final pie crust, brushing it with egg white, as well.
- ~ Sprinkle top crust with sugar and cinnamon.
- ~ Cut 4 or 5 slits in top of crust for steam to escape.
- ~ Bake for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour or until golden brown and bubbly, shielding with aluminum foil during last 10 minutes to prevent excessive browning, if necessary.
- ~ Cool on wire rack 30 minutes before serving.

In Texas, we eat apple pie with vanilla ice cream ☐ Y'all enjoy!

Caryl's Other Titles

with Five-Star Reviews

Historical Texas Romances



...for **Vow Unbroken**

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance. --*Publishers Weekly*

After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults. --Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*



...for **Hearts Stolen**

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen* grabbed me at the start. Sassy's feisty, fighting spirit...I couldn't set it down. Burnt dinner, but forget eating, I ate this book up. This master storyteller weaves Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters. --Holly Michael, author, [Crooked Lines](#)





...for **Hope Reborn**

With memorable characters, Caryl's signature humor, and plenty of adventure, drama, and romance, "Hope Reborn" is anything but fluff. A strong message of salvation runs through, but well within the storyline. Enjoyed a unique twist with May writing the stories of the previous characters – clever and fun!

--Pam Morrison, Tennessee reader

Contemporary Red River Romances



...for *The Preacher's Faith*

Great story! Hope there's a sequel, and I'd love to see the artful

dodger as a part of it. Maybe a reunion? And he could find his mother. Just love curling up in an afghan with a cup of cappuccino and reading Caryl's books! Keep on writing!

--Lenda Selph, Texas reader

This was my first book to read by Caryl McAdoo and I absolutely loved it. I will be reading more. I love the way she prays that her story gives God Glory and dedicates The Preacher's Faith to Him and His Kingdom...a good clean book to read. I was drawn into this story right from the start. I loved this book and can't wait for book two.

--Elizabeth 'Liz' Dent, Alabama reader



...for **Sing a New Song**

Sing A New Song is a delightful breath of Christian air. Caryl eloquently brings her audience always nearer to God and opens readers to fresh ways of viewing Christian life and all it offers. The characters are loveable and humorous. The romantic tale, just as lovely, demonstrates Christian virtues best remembered. Illuminating, the story shares the Gospel beautifully. Samuel's sermons as well as the gorgeous lyrics of Mary Esther's songs fill our hearts with newfound worship. Truly an inspiring tale. Christian fiction in its best; a romantic love story that brings its readers closer to God. A treasure for sure.

--Christine Barber, author of *Broken to Pieces*



...for **One and Done**

Faster than a major league outfielder pulling down a popup fly

ball, Caryl McAdoo's romance is guaranteed to snag baseball lovers and romance readers alike. This Christian story is written with wit, verve and Caryl McAdoo's usual flare for dialect and spicy dialogue. Be warned. Those readers searching for a saccharine, man-meets-woman story will soon discover this is no sanitized romantic fairy tale. From the beginning, the reader will identify with real people who live clearly in the mind, so much so, that a person can almost smell locker room sweat or the mouthwatering scent of spicy Mexican food. Identification with the hero and heroine is nearly immediate. With so much to rave about, this review cannot begin to cover all the delightful surprises, so the reader simply must buy "One and Done" to see for themselves.

—Cass Wessel, multi-published devotional author

Contemporary Apple Orchard Romance



...for Lady Luck's a Loser

A very unique, witty plot. I couldn't put it down. I love that my favorite characters are still very much active at the end of the book only their relationships have changed. What a way for Dub to fulfill his promises to his deceased wife. Love, trust, forgiveness, and many emotions make for a well written book.

--Joy Gibson, Tennessee reader

The Generations Biblical fiction



***...for A Little Lower
Than the Angels***

Caryl McAdoo used her research and knowledge of biblical scripture combined with an incredible imagination as a foundation to fill in the gaps of the story of Adam and Eve and their children. I was caught up in the story from page one to the ending. I particularly appreciated the "Search the Scriptures" section at the end which explains some of the Biblical clues for this work of fiction. I loved it and highly recommend it.

--Judy Levine, reader, Arizona



...for *Then the Deluge Comes*

Deluge is the second book in The Generations Series, and if the books still to follow are as good as this one and the first one in the series are it is going to be an incredible series. The author has a way of breathing life and emotions into the characters that made me feel like I was on the sidelines watching their stories unfold. This is some of the best Biblical fiction that I have read and I look forward to the rest of the series. I was furnished with an e-copy of the book in return for an honest review.

--Ann Ellis, reader, Texas



...for Replenish the Earth

Caryl McAdoo has retold the familiar Genesis flood account with clarity and sensitivity. While remaining faithful to the King James Version, the human story beneath the print page comes alive drawing the reader into the pathos and joys of real breathing people faced with the most devastating natural disaster ever known in human history, one which survives in the mythology of every culture and race, but which is most fully and literally told in the pages of the Bible. This reviewer loved this segment of The Generations Series and heartily recommends the whole work.

--Cass Wessel, multi-published devotional author

Non-Fiction



...for *Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction*

This is a wonderful book for those wanting to learn more about writing. I know from experience. The content helped me tremendously!! It especially helped me gain a clear picture of POV and the use of action versus attribution to strengthen my writing and make my debut book the best it can be. Thank you, Caryl, your continued helping hands are a blessing to many of us rookie writers!!

--Andy Skrzynski, author of

[The New World, A Step Backward](#)

And Coming Soon...

Starfish Prime ~ (a change in October's release)

A mid-grade not-so-far-into-the-future dystopia. Book One of The King's Highway trilogy / **October 13, 2015**

Strange things start happening beginning with the electricity going off. Cars die in the middle of the road, and planes are falling from the sky all around the DFW Airport.

Fifteen-year-old Jackson waits four days on his mother to return. She went in early for a meeting in Rockwall, but it shouldn't take even two days to get home. With his Marine dad in Afghanistan, he's the man of the house and decides he must get his siblings, twelve-year-old Makenzie and nine-year-old Cooper, to a safer place—his grandparents' in Honey Grove, only a couple of hours by car, but they'll have to walk.

Children of Eber

A Biblical fiction; volume four of The Generations series / **November 2, 2015**

Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac live out their stories.

Just Kin (formerly titled Son of Many Fathers)

A historical Christian Texas Romance / Book Six / Jan. 2016

Charley Nightingale comes home from the Civil War to find Lacey has run off, heading out to join the People of her father and Charley takes out after her alone.

Then Judgement

A Biblical fiction; volume one of new He Who Ascended series / **March 6, 2016**

The story of what happened the three days Christ was supposedly in the grave. Launching in time for the Passover and Resurrection Sunday. You will not want to miss this one!

At Liberty to Love

A historical Christian Texas Romance / Book Seven / **May 2016**

You met Rebecca when she was nine years old in 1832. The Civil

War is over and the states are united again. At Liberty to Love takes up in that aftermath of rebuilding and is the story everyone's been waiting for.

For your enjoyment...a preview of book six in the historical Texas Romance series...due to debut January, 2016. So many readers have told me they can't wait for Charley's book, and here it is! He was four and Lacey Rose was actually born in book two, Hearts Stolen.

JUST KIN

Chapter One

“One more, with the whole family.”

Lacy Rose backed away a step. Aunt May hurried about, putting everyone exactly where she wanted them. The photographer hovered, offering advice, but no one was paying the man much attention.

“Lacy, come stand here by your mama.”

She didn’t want to. She really wasn’t a part of the family, but wouldn’t do to argue, not with the mistress of the house, only one that could win with her was Uncle Henry.

Took only a few minutes that seemed liked an hour and it was over, except it was just beginning. How could some tall guy from Illinois - wherever that was – start a war just by getting himself elected president?

Tears flowed, kisses and hugs all around and all she could do was watch. He was leaving with them in his fancy uniform. He did look dashing, but why? They all hated slavery, yet to the man, they were going off to defend Texas as Confederate soldiers.

He kissed the last cheek then strode toward the wagon he was to drive. She couldn’t stand it. He was leaving, and she’d never ever... She jumped off the porch and raced to him. He turned, and she threw herself into his arms. She pressed her lips against his. At first he stood stone still then kissed her back, her heart stopped, then boomed against her ribs. He pushed her back.

“I love you, Charley Nightingale. I’ve loved you forever. You come back to me. Please promise you’ll come back.”

He nodded, then put his lips on hers.

“Lacy Rose Langley!”

Charley leaned back and smiled. “You best go on, we’ve got to leave.”

She backed away a step. “I know.”

She stood in the yard in front of the big house and watched until the last glimpse, then the tears welled and she fell to her knees and sobbed. He loved her and yet he was gone. Why hadn’t she told him before now? A hand grabbed her arm and tugged.

“Get yourself inside.”

She looked up, her mother pulled on her arm. Instead of screaming no, she nodded and whispered. “Yes ma’am.”

“Dust yourself off. Let me see if you ruined that dress.”

“Oh, Mother, a little dirt isn’t going to hurt.”

Once inside, she let her mama drag her to her and Jean Paul’s quarters, while all she wanted to do was go upstairs to her room and cry until Charley came home. The door closed and her mother turned on her.

“What were you doing? Have you and Charley Nightingale been slipping around behind our backs?”

“No.”

“Then why were you two carrying on?” She glared. “If my pa were alive he’d of skinned you and me for acting like a sporting lady.”

“Oh, Mother, please. All I did was kiss him goodbye.” She sniffed, wiped her cheeks, then returned the stare. She wasn’t about to look away or repent. Why would she? Hadn’t done anything wrong.

“You threw yourself at him, for lands sake girl, everyone was looking at you two, I’ll never hear the end of it from Rose and Rebecca, and no telling what Miss May will think.” She balled her fist. “If we have to move over this, I’ll...”

“Oh, Mother, Daddy is running things now that Uncle Henry is gone.”

“No, he’s not. May and Chester are in charge and if she says we’re out of here, then what? We don’t have anything.”

Lacy Rose knew better than to argue with her mother, but she was being so idiotic, no one was going to do anything over one little kiss, well it was actually two, but....

“It’s the Comanche in you, isn’t it? Admit it.”

Her cheeks flushed. “What are talking about?”

“Oh I’ve known for years. Bart told me about you trying to get him to run off with you when you were only nine.”

Her breath came hard. How could he? “What of it?”

“You are so ungrateful, you...”

“What am I, Mother?”

“A half breed! That’s what you are, Lacey Rose! An ungrateful savage who can’t control yourself!”

There it was. In all her eighteen years, her mother had never called her that. But now the truth of the matter was out. Tears welled again, but she blinked then away. She wanted to scream, but instead, she nodded, turned, and walked out. Once the door closed, she ran all the way to her room.

She’d show her!

She’d show them all who the real savage was.



Though much like herding cats, May finally got the children's feet under the kitchen table, sugar cookies passed out, and put them under Jewel's watchful eye.

May smiled at Rose and nodded toward the library, then offered the same wordless invitation to Rebecca. Once the younger ladies sat comfortably in the two wingbacks, she pressed into her husband's chair.

Oh, it fit her so well.

"Well, I'm sure you know why we're here. Has Charley said anything to you, Rose?"

"No, ma'am. Not a word, but then he's always been tightlipped, especially when it comes to matters of the heart. I didn't even know he'd been courting that Lattimore girl until her mama said something at church about him not coming around anymore."

Rebecca leaned out and faced Rose. "When was this? Why didn't anyone tell me? You're talking about Olive Lattimore, aren't you? She's a very nice young lady. Charley could do way worse."

"That's what I told him, but by the time I found out, for all practical purposes, it was over. He said she wasn't the girl for him in that I'm-a-grown-man-and-don't-need-you-in-my-business tone I just hate."

"He's grown up so fast."

"I know. I think Levi may have had something to do with his decision, at least I'm pretty sure he agreed with it."

If May let them go on, who knew how long they'd talk about Charley and Olive? But she had serious matters to take into hand.

"Excuse me, ladies. I'd like to get back to Lacey." She faced the redhead she loved like a little sister. "So, has Charley said anything at all about her?"

"Not a word to me."

"Nor I."

"I wouldn't want either of you to break any confidences, but have your husbands...?" May nodded then looped her head into a no, but only got shrugs for a response. "I know I'm grasping at straws, but this is important, and it's left to me. Only the Lord knows when we'll see our menfolk again."

"I was almost as shocked that Charley kissed her back. I mean, at first, he just stood there ram rod straight, then...oh..." Rose fanned herself. "Levi used to kiss me that way."

Glancing from her to her friend, Rebecca smiled. "Wallace still does. Well, when he's of a mind, but that's...." Both of them blushed, and kept up their comparisons. May closed her eyes and leaned back remembering a special time of her own.

"Mama?"

Oh, she would love to have stayed longer with Henry, but opened her eyes. "Yes! I apologize. I'd like a word with Lacey and Laura now. Either of you care to volunteer to fetch them?"

Rose jumped to her feet. "I'll get them."

"No, wait." Rebecca rose. "You should probably stay if it's okay"

They both looked to May and she gave them a nod. "Certainly."

"Let me go then, and I'll take the children out from under Jewel's feet. Read them a story or two. Here, you sit in my chair. That'll leave the extra straight-back for Lacey. Anything else I should tend to, Mama?"

"No, nothing just now, darling."

"Thank you, my friend. I owe you." Rose sat down again.

Not soon enough, the door swung open. Poor Lacey looked like a trapped, wide-eyed kitten. Laura walked pass her daughter and sat in the wingback opposite from Rose. She didn't appear in such good shape herself.

"Sweetheart, would you get that chair and sit it there next to your mother?"

"Yes, ma'am." The girl's red face and swollen eyes clearly bore witness of her broken heart. She complied getting it, but remained standing, gripping the back's top slat until her knuckles turned white. "Miss May, I love him. I've always loved him for as long as I can remember." The girl faced the lady she apparently wanted to be her mother-in-law. "He was leaving, and I had to."

Her own mother jumped to her feet and turned on the girl. "Now hush your mouth, Lacey Rose. Sit yourself down, and allow Miss May tell us what for."

Never had May heard Laura talk so rough to any child. She'd always been so patient.

"Yes, please. Do sit. I...uh...we, that's Rose and I, we're wondering..." She smiled at the girl who squatted on the chair's edge looking like she might bolt any second. "Well, about you and Charley."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'd like to find out more about this...this... Is there anything we need to know, dear?"

"Like what? I just said that we love each other. What else are you talking about?"

Clearing her throat, Rose nodded and scooted to the edge of her chair, too, but instead of bolting, the red-head appeared as if she wanted to shake the girl.

"In fact, that isn't what you said, sweetheart. Earlier you said you loved him. Now you're saying we love each other. Have the two of you spoken before? Has Charley told you that he loves you?"



Lacey's heart boomed. She wanted to fly out the door, but instead, smiled at Charley's mama. "Isn't it evident?"

"I would appreciate straight answers, Lacey, please. We need to know exactly what has transpired. Miss Rose asked if the two of you spoken of a relationship? If so, then how long has this been going on? Has he done anything?"

Were they all blind? "Yes, of course. Didn't you see? He kissed me back. He does love me. I know he does now, and I love him. And he promised –"

"Promised what, young lady?" If her mother's eyes spit the fire in them, Lacey would be covered in burns. She hated her.

Without a glance in her direction, she spoke in a stilted manner. "He's. Coming. Back. For me. That's what."

Miss May put her hands on the desk and leaned forward. Her face remained pleasant enough, but she glared almost as much as Ma.

"We all saw the kiss, Lacey. Now I'm going to ask you one more time, and I expect a civil answer. Before today, has anything happened between the two of you?"

Her cheeks burned. Wait, wait. What were they all thinking? Her mouth went dry and she wanted to die. If only the floor would open and swallow her up. Finally, she worked up a single swallow.

So.

They all thought...

That's what this was all about. Any second, one of them would call her a half-breed, too. That's the real truth of this inquisition. She wasn't good enough for Levi and Wallace's littlest partner.

Jumping to her feet, she placed her fists on her hips. "I hate you all."

Slowly, she turned, glaring, daring each of them in turn, but to the woman, they just sat there staring back at her.

They thought she was whore, that she'd done something horrible. It shone right in their eyes, all of them.

Of their own accord, her feet propelled her to the door and out. But where?

Where could she run?

Hope you'll all enjoy *Just Kin* coming January, 2016!

Reach out to the author...

Website <http://www.CarylMcAdoo.com>

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Praying my story gives God glory! □
Blessings, Caryl

Author reaching out to you!

Hey dear Reader!

Where would I be if not for you? I always pray my story gives God glory and hope you enjoyed it. My desire is that it brought you closer to Him and gave you issues to ponder, asking for God's perspective.

If you'd like to stay right on top of all my book news, I'd love you

to subscribe to my email newsletter The Caryler which comes each month to your Inbox. I try to make it fun with a Scripture of the day and a lyric of the day. God gives me new songs and there's nothing I'd rather do than praise and worship Him in song!

I include a few of my favorite things in it, too. My husband, being my favorite man, has a little corner and shares a few of his thoughts. I include other Christian authors and bloggers, sometimes a movie or book review, or a song.

What I'm working on, what's finished and coming out soon, and sales coming up on different titles. And the best part—as far as you're concerned—is that as my thank you for being a subscriber and following me, I'll give you a FREE e'BOOK every quarter! Four new books a year! Who can beat that? You can sign up at my website www.CarylMcAdoo.com in the right column on my Home page.

I hope if you like my story, you'll take the time to review it and click “follow” under my picture while you're there.□ And of course that you'll tell your friends. I love visiting with my readers, and have a group of special readers who help me spread the word when I have a new release. Let me know if you'd like to be a part of the Christian eVALUaters. Stop by my Facebook page, too!

Love in Christ and many blessings,

Caryl

A few links Others might find helpful:



Needing any help with your online presence? Go to [Rocksteady Resolutions](#) for help with websites, email lists, and all social media outlets. CEO Janis McAdoo (yes, my daughter-in-love) will be the best virtual assistant you could ever have. She is knowledgeable, energetic, full to the brim of integrity, and I promise, will be a God-sent blessing to you!

Three Facebook groups:

[Christian Indie Books](#) is a great place to find great books from new authors who post new releases, special sales, and sometimes, even free books!

[Christian Indie Authors Readers Group](#) is a great place to visit to meet new authors who post deals and often even free books!

[5-Star Reviews of Christian Fiction](#): Find out all the favorites of readers such as yourself here, and feel free to join and post your own reviews of books you love and rank with FIVE STARS!

Blogs:

[India's Crown in Christian Literature Excellence](#) INDIA'S CROWN'S objective is to join Christian American authors with like-minded readers from India. Premier resource for Christian literature across both continents. A book awarded FREE each week from the guest author.

[Faith, Friends...and Chocolate](#)

[Stitches Thru Time](#)